even children get older by birthdaycandles

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Summary:

Jonathan doesn't even know *what* he imagined. Driving along beautiful scenery with a perfect soundtrack while they pretended to be on a romantic getaway and not a death mission? Whatever it was, it definitely didn’t involve Steve Harrington and Robin Buckley and their weird, horrifying way of making everything into one big joke no matter how serious.

(or, the teen road trip to solve a mystery five states over)

1. Chapter 1

Steve still feels a little strangled when he sees Nancy.

Which is stupid. He reminds himself every day how stupid it is. Honestly, he isn't in love with her anymore. The first time he'd ever said that out loud was on the floor of his bedroom approximately three weeks after they'd broken up officially, but the first time he'd said it and really meant it was on the floor of the Starcourt bathroom nearly eight months later. When he'd said it to Robin, he expected to instantly hear the whispered response from down in his chest that said, *no you aren't, dumbass*. It was the first time he didn't hear that. It was official that night.

Maybe the Russians knocked it out of him for good, who knows. He has gaps in his memory sometimes from the repeated head trauma. Maybe he forgot how to love Nancy. Forgot how to love *anyone* that isn't in his immediate group of co-monster fighters, but whatever, it doesn't matter enough to think about. Right now all he can think about is the fact that Nancy is standing at the counter of Family Video with something folded up in her hands, her face much more urgent than it usually is when she comes in here.

"Hey." She greets him casually once he's finished shoving the remaining tapes he had in his hands under the counter to be reshelved later. When she smiles, the urgency on her face is lessened a little. Not enough to trick him.

"Hey yourself. You wanna hear some good news?"

Nancy looks skeptical, but she nods. "Sure."

"After the last shipment we now have," He nods toward the cut-out of Molly Ringwald dressed in a knee-length pink and blue checked skirt that he's certain Nancy has in her closet, "*five* copies of Sixteen Candles. That's up from the one that's been on constant reserve for two months."

Nancy looks over her shoulder at the cut-out. Her hair is in a high bun, now officially back from being permed but apparently past

being in the old ponytail. The bun stays tight when she swivels her head back to face him. He misses the swing of her ponytail, but Nancy definitively chooses when to cut things out of her life for good. When she's too old for them. The ponytail got the axe, and the little ballet slipper necklace got the axe, and now her face is all scrunched up with distaste in a way that suggests maybe Sixteen Candles got the axe when he wasn't watching.

"I haven't watched that movie in like," She laughs as if the very idea of watching Sixteen Candles is ridiculous, "two years."

"You loved that movie!"

"Loved." Nancy agrees. "Past tense."

Steve understands past tense. He's comfortably familiar with it, actually. Past tense feels like home. It's worn like his favorite shirt to sleep in, the Hawkins High athletic shirt that's a size too big because it was just a leftover from the season and no one else claimed it. Softer than it ever could've been if he let it hang in his closet for days at a time and arguably better fitting as if it somehow adjusted to his body.

Nancy looks apologetic suddenly, which she shouldn't. He isn't seriously wounded by her lack of enthusiasm at his news. It wasn't even really news that he was eagerly planning to share with her. It was the first thing that came into his head when he saw her, an idea for something that could fill the space after they initially greet each other and then stare nervously and try to think of some way to ignore the weird way they both feel. It had worked, but now the conversation has been abruptly killed and they're back to just sort of looking at each other.

Until Nancy shakes the folded paper in her hands and asks, "Can we talk about something?"

"Sure, if you can talk about it right here. Robin's on her lunch break."

"I...can't really. Talk about it right here."

His first thought is that disaster is happening again. This secrecy feels

familiar because they'd invented a language around it back when they were dating and the government was holding a gun to their heads at all times. A deliberate eyebrow raise that meant *not here*. A sharp head jerk that meant *this is serious shit*.

His second thought is that he's being paranoid again. Not everything is life or death, Robin says, and his brain is tricking him into thinking it is. Nancy might want to ask him something about Mike, which she's done before. He doesn't exactly know what she could possibly ask that's so sensitive that she doesn't want the old couple huddled by the historical dramas to hear, but there's probably something. Nancy doesn't like when people know her business, even if it's business that doesn't really need to be a state secret.

Still. Because his paranoia doesn't just go away when he asks it to, he tilts his head a little and looks again at the paper in her hand. It doesn't look particularly like a secret government document or whatever. "What's this about?"

She raises her eyebrows. His heart slips right out of his ribcage.

"Yeah, okay. That's what the sign is for, right? I mean Keith isn't even here and if he is, whatever, I get fired. Worse fates, am I right?" He's babbling, he knows he is, but that's just what happens when he's nervous. Nancy knows. She reaches across the counter and grasps at his wrist, using another one of their old signals, slightly modified for the circumstances: the hand squeeze. This one is a little higher up, but it means the same thing.

Calm down.

Steve sets up the little tent card that instructs customers to ring the bell for service and flips up the counter for Nancy to join him in the break room. The table is clean for once, because Robin opted to eat her lunch out in the parking lot on the hood of his car. She's a freak who says the cold weather makes her feel alive.

Nancy takes the clean table as an invitation to finally unfold and reveal the paper. Once she's smoothed it out to her satisfaction and stepped back, he realizes it's actually a map. It's worn around the edges, curling and yellowed at one corner like it was crammed

somewhere it didn't fit. There's a brown stain over Florida. More importantly, there's red marker tracing a specific route that starts in Indiana and ends in, Steve squints,

"Utah?" He glances up at Nancy, who's standing with her arms crossed tight over her chest in a weirdly tense position. Maybe she's put off by the smell of tuna that haunts this room no matter how much air freshener they spray, or the whiteboard where employees were supposed to write suggestions to better the store and Robin scrawled **XXX SECTION -- RIGHT AT THE FRONT** in red marker. "What's in Utah? Other than Dustin's lost love."

"Have you been watching the news?"

Steve has never watched the news. He's pretty sure Nancy knew this, but maybe she expects that he's matured a little now that he's nineteen and perhaps started caring about the state of the world. He knows he should. "Uh, I--yeah, I mean I guess a little, you know--"

"There are people going missing in Utah." Nancy says finally, taking another look at the door. "Does that lock?"

"If there was ever a lock on that door, Keith had it removed when me and Robin were hired."

"Not only are they going missing," Nancy says, suddenly taking a seat on the little plastic chair that's usually his, "but they're turning up a few days later in places that their families don't understand. Mostly in the national park right by the town with most of the disappearances. Arches."

A dark red nail points at the blip on the map labelled as Arches National Park. The only national park Steve knows is Yellowstone, because he'd had to do a project on it in Freshman geography. It had sounded pretty cool, actually. Giant geyers that shoot boiling water fifty feet in the air and then just go back to looking like regular old lakes.

"That's really sad." Steve says, looking up to meet her eyes. He knows she's about to tell him that it's more than sad. It's suspicious. Suspicious in a way that Nancy Wheeler can't just explain away with

anything other than what she decides is most likely to be the truth.

“Yeah.” She agrees impatiently. “One of the bodies that was found was an eleven-year-old.”

“Jesus, Nance.”

“Found in a national park. Alone. And his family says they haven’t visited the park grounds in weeks, before he went missing, and now he turns up off a hiking trail that’s considered one of the most advanced. The news is saying he might have wandered off, but first of all how would he have even gotten into the park alone? And what would he have been doing there? He’s *eleven*--”

“Okay.” Steve knows she hates being interrupted, but he needs a second. He closes his eyes and waits for his brain to stop picturing a faceless eleven-year-old off the side of a mountain, but the image stays burned into the back of his eyelids the way a television will hold an outline even as it fades to black. “Okay. Why are you telling me about this?”

Nancy does that thing where she sucks in her cheeks and purses her lips, like she’s about to say something but she’s just so absolutely baffled by his stupidity that she can’t find the words. He saves her the struggle by amending,

“I mean, yeah, I get why.” Steve shifts in his chair (Robin’s chair) and leans forward to look at the map again. He puts a fingertip to the worn paper and counts, “Utah is one, two, three, four states over. Pretty far away. Things are probably pretty different over there. Especially with the Mormons and stuff.”

“Exactly.” Nancy agrees. “Far enough away that it’s weird we’d be hearing about this all the way in Indiana. News from there doesn’t usually reach us. Vice versa.”

“So why did it?”

“It barely did. This wasn’t a news report about people going missing, it was about the spike in deaths in national parks due to inclimate weather. Mostly in the mountains.”

“So…” Steve’s brain hurts a little more than usual. She’s packing every word with meaning, like he should instantly be making connections between Utah and Hawkins. But, “People are dying in these national parks because like, they’re going hiking on the mountains and it’s snowing and stuff. Happens every year. And you’re worried because…?”

“Because there are no *mountains* in Arches.” Nancy snaps. “For the first time in like, fifty years, the park has had as many deaths in the month of November as the months of June, July, August, the times when people die of dehydration or heat exhaustion. And they’ve had blackouts. Over the whole town of Moab.”

“They reported that?”

“No.” Nancy breaks eye contact for the first time, looking back down at the map as if she hasn’t probably memorized every detail of it by now. “I found out.”

“How’d you find out?”

“I might have,” She sucks in a breath, “pretended to be a resident of Moab having electrical problems and asked the local power company if other people were experiencing it.”

“You *what*--”

“And the electrician I talked to said yes! The whole town is having rolling blackouts, they have been for a week. Steve. Missing people showing up in places that don’t make sense. Blackouts.”

He knows what it means. Deep down he knows, and he hates it, and there are still some things in his brain that don’t quite make sense but it’s not his brain that knows, it’s his gut. It’s just this built-in function his body has now, as natural as his high alcohol tolerance and his allergy to cat hair. He somehow instinctively knows when something is *something*.

But just because he has this deeply buried understanding of the truth doesn’t mean he’s going to so easily accept it. Steve has always wondered this about Nancy--how she just accepts things, no matter

how horrible they are. The equivalent to just smacking her hand on a hot stovetop and somehow managing not to flinch away.

“So, okay, even if it *is*...something.” He ventures. She nods. “What are we supposed to do about it?”

“We go there.”

And he knew that was her plan, because she has a route marked and everything, but hearing it said with such straightforward determination and not a hint of irony on her face really is terrifying.

“We go to Utah? And then we, what? Are we bringing El? Are we bringing Will to use his mental tracking device?”

The questions don’t frazzle her, because of course they don’t. Nancy wouldn’t have approached him with this without first thinking of every possible avenue for him to question. “We figure out if it *is* something. We don’t involve the kids at all, or Ms. Byers for that matter.”

“And how are we supposed to fix anything on our own? I hate to bring this up, Nance, but you and Byers were totally dead meat against that thing the first time and I haven’t exactly been practicing my swing, so--”

“We were *not*.” Nancy disagrees vehemently. “And no, we aren’t going to solve the whole thing ourselves. But we have something that the people there don’t.”

She pauses, like he’s supposed to guess what it is. “Bad impulse control?”

“Information.” Nancy insists. “Look, what are the odds that anyone in Moab is as determined as Ms. Byers was to figure everything out? And even if they are, the people doing this are smart enough to know that they can’t let history repeat itself. They’re going to be cleaner this time, so that even if someone does go looking, they won’t find anything.”

“Then how will we?”

“We have a two year head start.” Nancy smiles when she says this. In high school, when he loved her, her smiles were always so...restrained. Shy. He only ever got a glimpse of her real smile when he watched from afar, peeking over at her lunch table where she always sat with Barb Holland and laughed harder than she ever would around him. No matter how hard he tried, none of his efforts ever produced a smile that felt full and authentic and completely genuine.

He can’t take credit for this one, either. Nancy would be beaming at the idea of driving to Utah and saving the residents of some town no one’s ever heard of even if he was completely uninvolved. It’s just a coincidence that he’s here to witness the way her eyes are glittering with determination and not even a hint of fear.

It’s what makes loving Nancy so terrifying. Loving not just in the romantic sense, which he doesn’t anymore, but in the genuinely platonic sense, which he will forever. She’ll always want to fix things, no matter where that leads her.

“Why are you asking me?” He asks. She looks caught off guard by the question. “I mean, I’m assuming you’ve already talked about this with Jonathan. Did he say no or something?”

“He didn’t say no.” Nancy replies, an odd way to avoid saying that he said yes. “Look, you can say no. I get it. I mean, I know after what happened to you over the summer--”

“Yeah, no, it’s--” His throat tightens up the way it always does when anyone besides Robin brings it up. He suddenly really wants her to come back from break. “It’s not that. You know I’m going to say yes. But why not go to anyone else? Someone who knows there aren’t mountains in Utah.”

“There are mountains in Utah, just not in Arches. If I tell Ms. Byers, that also means telling Will and El. Jonathan didn’t want to dump this on them, and neither did I. It was actually his idea to ask you.”

She stops talking and just looks at him. Expectant. Steve feels like he’s talking to her on the phone during a thunderstorm, when the power flickers and he misses specific parts of the conversation so he

doesn't know what to reply to and she doesn't know why he isn't replying. There must be a dumb blank look on his face that Nancy picks up on, because she elaborates.

"Steve, there is no one else."

That can't be right. Every time he's in the aftermath of a monster trying to destroy the town, his head aches and there are too many people. He'd sat in the waiting room while Will pulled through and felt like his contribution--if you could call sitting there with a bloody face that he rightfully earned a contribution--barely mattered in the crowd of people there. The Wheelers, all those kids, Hopper.

But the Wheelers don't know what happened, not really. Even back then, he'd felt that the age of those kids made the whole thing a real injustice, and now that he gives them rides to Hawkins High, which he can't fucking believe they attend, he still feels that every night when he lays awake and thinks everything through. And Hopper…

Steve swallows. Out of everyone who remains in Hawkins that knows what really happened in the fall of 1984, he's the oldest. He's the most responsible. It isn't exactly difficult to come to terms with being the oldest, because really he's felt years older than Nancy, Jonathan, and Robin for forever despite only having a few months on the oldest of them. It's just the fact that there's absolutely no back-up now, no safety net.

Not that there was ever a safety net for him, really. Hopper and Ms. Byers tried, but they couldn't be in two places at once and understandably the place they chose to be first was with their children. No adult came to get them from the bottom of Starcourt. Robin had been one-hundred-percent depending on him entirely to get her out, just like the kids had in the tunnels months before, and Nancy and Jonathan had in the Byers' house despite however strongly they feel they would've been okay without him. They wouldn't have. So what's the difference, really? He's used to being the oldest and figuring something out to keep everyone younger from dying a horrible death that would definitely be his fault.

Really, it's the only time he's ever been useful.

“What do I tell my parents?” He asks, mostly asking because he’s curious what she’s going to tell her parents.

“Uh, Jonathan and I are going with the college trip excuse.”

Oh. Steve is actively working on training himself not to hate the word college. He also hates the way Nancy is looking at him with pity and maybe a little bit of discomfort.

“I can--” The creak of the door opening interrupts him and, thankfully, wipes the look off Nancy’s face. She jerks away from the map like she’s been caught doing something illegal and, for some reason, doesn’t relax when she sees that the intruder is Robin. Robin looks surprised at their company and not entirely thrilled.

“Those old people were ringing the bell for service for two minutes, they said.” She informs Steve with a huff, letting the door close behind her as she makes her way to the trash can to discard her brown paper bag and empty can of Dr. Pepper. “You could’ve just told me to save my break for after you had a secret rendezvous.”

“This was unplanned.” Steve informs her. There’s really no stopping Robin from looking over his shoulder at the map. He can’t decide if he wants her to know or not, so he decides to leave it up to fate. If she can figure out that this is more than Nancy just asking him advice on her Thanksgiving trip, it’s meant to be.

And of course she does. She knows six languages and can probably read Steve’s thoughts at this point.

“What is this?” Robin demands, already sounding like she’s going to protest.

“I’m going on a college trip.” Nancy says smoothly, unflinchingly. Steve tries not to scoff out loud. “Steve already toured some of the schools I’m looking at, so I was just asking the best way to do it.”

“Steve toured two schools, and it was only to get a free excused absence.”

Nancy looks at him with narrowed eyes, like it’s *his* fault that she chose a lie Robin would see through instantaneously. Robin is also

looking at him with narrowed eyes. The kids are always going on about loyalty, which Steve thinks is great until they have a fight between the six of them. Three weeks ago it had been between Mike, Lucas, and Dustin. All three of them somehow ended up in the same biology class and lab partners were done in two's, so someone had to be excluded. Steve spent several consecutive car rides talking them down from threats to "accidentally" knock over beakers of corrosive chemicals if they were the one left out.

The whole loyalty thing just doesn't work between them, because how do you choose? Lucas had raised the point that he and Mike had known each other longer, to which Dustin had countered that Lucas was the first person to invite him to the lunch table in fourth grade, to which Mike countered that *he* was the first person to share his pudding cup or whatever the hell.

Steve ended up bribing Mike with a twenty to just let Dustin take Lucas. Mike wasn't even interested in biology anyways. It made the most sense. They never would've worked that shit out on their own, just like Steve is never going to work out if he should be loyal to his ex-girlfriend who's sharing her plan with him or his best friend who he's been tortured with in this particular dilemma. He resigns himself to possibly making the wrong choice and goes with his gut.

"We're going to Utah to see if the people disappearing there have anything to do with, uh, certain circumstances." He blurts, and Nancy throws her hands up. Robin doesn't look particularly triumphant about her win. She looks two shades paler suddenly, a lot like she did in the Starcourt parking lot a few seconds before passing out from dehydration. He gets up and offers her seat back just in case history repeats itself.

She does not take the chair. She just stands there and stares at the map while he stands there and waits for her to say something, the empty chair between them, until suddenly she snaps back to life and kicks the chair in his direction. It's a weak kick, barely scratches his knee, but he has to act like it hurt so that he has some leverage here.

"Ow." He says, very convincingly if you ask him.

"What the fuck!" Robin exclaims. "You were just gonna take off to

Utah and hunt monsters--"

"Hey." He warns. She's new at this. Nancy just shushes her, which makes Robin look even more like she's about to snap Steve's neck.

"You weren't going to tell me?" She asks. Her eyes are big and round and *hurt.* And of course she's hurt. He would be too.

"I was going to tell you!"

"You were?" Nancy asks, arching her eyebrows.

"Yes, Nance, she knows what I know."

"Sorry I haven't been RSVP'd to your little club since sophomore year, Wheeler, but I know just as much as you do now."

Nancy makes a face. "Debatable."

"Okay, okay." Steve puts a hand up. They're probably going to get fired if they don't wrap this up soon, and they're definitely going to get fired if Nancy and Robin have a fist fight in the break room. "Robin, I was going to tell you, of course I was. This was *just* announced to me. Nancy, you didn't say not to tell her."

"I didn't think I had to tell you explicitly not to involve anyone else on this plan to do something potentially dangerous that we're only doing because we've done it several times before."

Which, in Steve's opinion, is kind of a bullshit argument. Lack of experience hasn't ever stopped Nancy from doing anything before. It's not that Robin has only had one monster encounter compared to their three that's keeping Nancy from wanting her on board. It's something else. He genuinely has no idea what, though.

"Telling her about it doesn't mean she's *involved*." He counters, keeping his voice calm.

"Oh, I'm going." Robin declares. "You're not going without me, Harrington, no way in hell."

He knows it's a bad situation, but the rush of warmth he feels can't

really be stopped by logic. There was never really any question that Robin would insert herself into danger just to be beside him. Even when she'd joined him at the door as the Russians broke in, he wasn't surprised. It's just something that Robin has written into her DNA. He smiles despite himself and reaches over the weaponized chair to grab her hand and squeeze it in the too-hard way that's become their signature way to show affection without feeling too corny.

"You said you were never going to be in the car with me for more than a half hour again."

"And I'm dreading it." Robin agrees, squeezing back.

It's a really nice moment between the two of them, Steve thinks, but Nancy clears her throat to interrupt. Her arms are still crossed over her chest, her eyes narrowed, her jaw set.

"There's no need for four people to do this. Really, there's no need for three."

"Then go with your boyfriend." Robin suggests, coating that word in her fake sugary sweetness that drives customers crazy because they know they're being condescended but they can't exactly complain about it in a way that makes sense.

"I *would*." Nancy says, and then drops her eyes for the first time and refuses to say anything else.

"Wait, yeah." Steve realizes. "You said there was no one else to come to, but you didn't say why you and Jonathan even need a third."

"We just do." Nancy says stubbornly.

Steve thinks it over. Nancy definitely packed the rifle Hopper left her, so she probably isn't recruiting Steve for security. He's pretty sure Jonathan hates him, so it doesn't really make sense that he'd suggest adding Steve to the group. What's keeping the two of them from just taking off together and driving to...wait.

"You can't drive." Steve remembers. Then he remembers that Nancy is insanely embarrassed by this particular situation. Her face immediately collects color and Steve has to give Robin a look to keep

her from laughing.

“I can *drive*, it’s just--” Nancy rolls her eyes. “My parents don’t think I should be driving such a long way when I haven’t had as much practice yet and, you know, it’s a long way for just Jonathan to drive on his own. So. Yes, I need you to come so you can drive.”

“I can drive.” Robin sing-songs. Steve squeezes her hand in a way that’s less cute and more threatening.

“Fine.” Nancy bites, abruptly standing up and folding her map back up. “You can come if you want, but it’s dangerous and complicated and you don’t get a second choice. This isn’t a road trip.”

“It sounds like a road trip, technically, by definition.”

“Rob, seriously.” Steve warns, because clearly the nonverbal signs aren’t working.

Nancy marches back to the door and pauses before she opens it, looking back at them over her shoulder. “Jonathan’s plane is landing tomorrow. Meet at my house at ten if you’re serious.”

“Wait, this is *tomorrow*?” Steve asks. He was picturing at least a week to prepare, to come up with something to tell Dustin.

“Thanksgiving break is over November 30th.” Nancy informs him. She opens the door, hesitating before she leaves, and hastily adds, “Bring your bat.”

Then she’s gone, taking up all of Steve’s break, and leaving his sweaty hand in Robin’s sweaty hand while they both silently contemplate. He doesn’t even fully understand why Robin is so adamant to come. Of course he’d go if it were her planning on embarking on a potentially dangerous journey, but he really does feel safe about this. This could still just be a coincidence. Not at all involved with the lab.

Robin doesn’t look particularly willing to talk about it, either. She just looks at him, still slightly too pale, and murmurs, “What the fuck am I going to tell my parents?”

Jonathan is glad to discover that he absolutely hates traveling by plane.

He wasn't glad during the flight, admittedly. There isn't really anything to feel glad about when your ears are popping no matter how much gum you chew, so now your jaw just aches in addition, and the guy on your left keeps elbowing you and the woman on your right can't keep her balance when trying to get to the bathroom. But Jonathan survived, and now he's standing outside Fort Wayne International Airport thinking about how he'll never wish they were rich enough for air travel ever again.

It isn't the only thing contributing to his good mood. He gets to see Nancy.

Leaving Hawkins had felt like a relief and a tragedy all at once. On the one hand, things do feel slightly safer in Bangor, Maine, where lights don't flicker and monsters don't crawl out of space rifts to steal your little brother. His defenses aren't completely lowered yet, seeing as it's barely been two months since they finished unpacking all the boxes, but at least he can check his closet three times at night instead of five. Progress is progress. Of course on the other hand, Jonathan has only ever lived in one other town and he misses it in ways he never expected to. Missing Nancy comes first, obviously, but in addition to losing her he also lost the school where he knew his way around, the movie theater with the best butter-to-popcorn ratio on earth, and just a...feeling that Hawkins has. He can't describe it, and if he held up a photograph of the trees in Hawkins and a photograph of the trees in Bangor and compared them, there wouldn't be any discernible difference. But there's *something*.

He wishes they could drive through Hawkins. They wouldn't even have to get out of the car, just roll down the windows and let him compare the difference between the oxygen there and his new oxygen in Maine. But Nancy's schedule is strict, and Fort Wayne is on their way out of Indiana. There's no time to go home.

It doesn't matter, he decides for the fifteenth time, because Nancy *is* home. Wherever she is will feel right.

She must feel the same way about him, even after two months of only talking on the phone every night until Mike or Will or El get their turn. He recognizes Ted Wheeler's Dodge Challenger the second it turns the corner and sails down the pick-up lane. Before it can even stop in front of him, the passenger door is flung open and Nancy is wrestling with her seat belt. The car screeches to a stop and Jonathan can vaguely hear Steve Harrington's voice exclaiming, *"Nance, Jesus!"* which goes completely unheard by Nancy, who's in his arms within seconds.

She buries her face in his shoulder and he reaches up to cradle the back of her head. Her hair is different now. Less poofy, and longer. It's still just as soft as always and apple-scented. Jonathan is almost surprised by how quickly he feels like the other half of her again, like he never even left. He was worried that coming back would be different. Now with the newfound confidence that they really are still *them*, he's the one who goes in to kiss her. They're being gross and cliche and painfully public about it, but he doesn't really care.

Nancy clearly doesn't care either. Not that he thought she would. She beams at him when they pull away and breathes, "Hey."

"Hey." He laughs. "Chewing gum did not work."

"Not even a little? I swear, every time we go to Florida it's worked perfectly."

"You have more agreeable ears, I guess." Jonathan shrugs with his arms still looped around her waist. She leans her head into his chest, her head still fitting perfectly under his chin, and Jonathan allows himself another five seconds to savor this. Admittedly, this is the part of the trip he was most anticipating.

He opens his eyes to the sight of Steve and Robin still standing at the car. The last time Jonathan saw Steve was two weeks before moving, but that was just a glimpse at the Melvald's. Steve hadn't seen him, he's pretty sure, and in the moment it seemed best to leave him alone. No need to incite awkward interactions while the guy was minding his own business and trying to buy dinner. The last time he'd interacted with Steve, really, had been Hopper's funeral. Steve had told Jonathan he was really sorry, and Jonathan had wanted to

say it back because Steve's face was still a mess of red and green and dark purple at that point, with new stitches in his lip, and he'd definitely cried during the service along with everyone else. But the words had gotten caught in his throat and all he could manage was a nod and a quiet, *"Yeah, thanks."*

His face isn't a wreck anymore, at least. That's pretty much the only thing that seems different. His hair is still long and styled the same as always, he's kicking at the ground with his old red and white Nikes, and Robin Buckley is still at his side. That one is a new development. Robin is leaning over into Steve's space, saying something that's making him smile in the direction of the ground, which he's yet to pull his eyes from.

Jonathan sort of wishes Steve wasn't coming. It was his idea to invite him and everything, and in a practical way it makes sense. When he left two months ago, Nancy couldn't drive between her house and Melvald's without a few hours of convincing and afterwards she'd sit in the driver's seat with shaking hands balled into tight fists. He doubts that she's improved enough to handle driving across state lines.

And it's not even that he dislikes Steve, because he doesn't anymore. It's just that things are complicated between the three of them, probably always will be, and they've never once been in a setting like this. A normal setting. Once they get to Utah and start plunging their hands back into blood and death and mystery, maybe they'll all click into place again. But until then, Jonathan has no idea how this is going to go. He has a strong sense of foreboding that the answer is *not well*.

Jonathan has only met Robin twice. Once at the mall, the night of, and then again at Hopper's funeral. Neither had really been a time for small talk. He recognizes her face from the hallways of Hawkins High, though. She'd always seemed friendly. Really that just meant that she never went out of her way to harass him. Nancy's voice had sounded incredibly clipped on the phone last night when she explained that Robin would now be joining them. Honestly though, Jonathan is sort of glad she's coming. It might even things out.

Nancy finally seems to finish up her self-allotted time of savoring

their reunion. She pulls back, plants one more kiss efficiently on his cheek, and turns to lead him to the car. At last Steve looks up, and when he does he has an easy-going smile on his face. Robin isn't exactly smiling, but she isn't frowning either. She looks like she's scanning him.

"Hey, Byers. Long time." Steve greets, automatically reaching forward to take one of Jonathan's bags. He allows it. His back is killing him.

"Yeah." Jonathan says. He's not sure what else there really is to say. Commenting on how strange this is, them loading up the car to drive to Utah and solve the mystery of missing persons voluntarily, would be pointless. They all already know. They've all already laid awake last night thinking about it. He forces himself to make eye contact with Robin. "Hey."

"Hey." She echoes, still not really fully smiling.

Steve makes his way to the back of the car with Jonathan's duffel, shouldering against Robin as he goes. She shoves him as he passes, giving Jonathan a taste of what her real smile is. He follows Steve to the back and takes a look into the little trunk crammed with bags and small suitcases, apparently unable to hide his skepticism. Steve laughs.

"Don't worry, we planned it out. Worst case scenario, we leave Rob's stuff on the side of the road."

"I guess I should have packed lighter." Jonathan murmurs, watching Steve try to squish his bag into a shape that won't make the trunk pop back open the second they close it. "We could try tying stuff to the top?"

"Nah, I got it." Steve assures him. It would be more assuring if his voice weren't strained with the effort of trying to shove down all the sweaters that Jonathan knows are in the bag with his elbow. To his credit, though, he quickly straightens out and slams the trunk, gives it a cautious moment, and then grins proudly when it stays down. "Told ya."

Jonathan's seat in the car has been delegated to the back for now. Robin is at the wheel, which he wasn't expecting, and Nancy is already buckled in behind her. There's another two duffel bags on the floor, which Jonathan has no choice but to put his feet on to keep from having to sit cross-legged.

It's tight. But the car is nice, because Mr. Wheeler bought it during his mid-life crisis so he was willing to drop big numbers on it. The seats are a nice, unbroken upholstery and the dashboard is a maze of dials and features that take up space he didn't realize was so empty in his own car. Robin seems comfortable enough with it all. Especially with the radio, which she's already adjusting.

Jonathan recognizes the song immediately, and it feels like he's been socked in the stomach. The power of memory association has always been one of his favorite things about music, but right now he's transported back to a small living room with an old brown couch, a tiny television flicking through channels at lightning speed, the sounds of cooking and talking floating in from the nearby kitchen.

"Can you change the station?" He asks, trying to cut the memories off at the source.

"It's a tape." Nancy informs him, sighing. "We can't figure out Dad's radio. All the stations he has saved are like, conservative talk radio and we don't know how to set them to anything else."

"You don't like Fleetwood Mac?" Robin asks, looking over her shoulder at him with an expression like he just suggested they rip the radio out of the car entirely and dump it on the side of the road.

"Figures." Steve mutters. "Told you he'd want the other tape. Seriously, Byers, you gotta branch out."

"It's not just *any* Fleetwood Mac song, it's *Landslide*! How can you--"

"Please." Jonathan tries again. It's a little sharper this time. Either the tone or something on his face works, because Robin simply shakes her head in disappointment and presses the eject button. The car is uncomfortably quiet now, but even in the awkwardness he feels like he can breathe better.

Nancy looks confused at the outburst, but she doesn't press it. She leans forward in her seat and hands Steve a folded-up map, which he takes without a word and spreads across his lap. There's a bright red line marking their way. It's long. The car hasn't even started moving yet.

"Okay, I get it." Steve nods after a few moments of quietly studying. "Rob, you're gonna want to get back on the feeder almost as soon as we get out of here."

"Who navigated here?" Jonathan asks. He's slightly nervous about getting lost. Nancy isn't great with direction, and he isn't great at deciphering her explanations. Hopefully with the map she does better. Or, even better, Steve or Robin somehow have the way to Utah memorized except for a few stretches here and there.

"Steve already knew the way to the airport." Nancy says. Folding her arms over her chest, she adds, "Robin wanted to drive first."

"To get used to the highway." Robin informs him, already easing the car out of the pick-up lane.

"You've never driven on the highway before?" He asks, alarmed.

"Don't worry about it. Steve, put the other tape in. I'm not driving in silence."

"You're gonna love this, Jonathan." Steve says with certainty. Jonathan settles back into his seat, confident that whatever is about to play is not going to be something he loves. He doubts Steve's taste in music has changed since he and Nancy were dating, and based on her reports that means that he considers Journey and Bruce Springsteen to be high art. Jonathan's experience with people whose favorite song is just whatever is playing on the radio that week is that their assumptions about *his* favorite music are almost always wrong. They don't really understand anything beyond what they listen to.

Reel Around the Fountain starts playing. Jonathan jerks his head up to look at Nancy, who was already watching him with a growing smile. "Yeah, surprise. The only two tapes we have are Fleetwood Mac and The Smiths."

Jonathan ignores the fact that he was just proven wrong to focus instead on the warm feeling in his chest. He'd mailed her that tape the first week he was in Maine. It had been too soon to work on a real mixtape. He'd been too busy with unpacking and starting school. But he'd wanted to mail her something, so he sacrificed one of his two tapes of The Smiths' self-titled album. He gave her the one that he kept in his room, since his brand new record player that Mom got him as a sort of apology and bribery to speed along his adjustment to the thought of moving replaced its usefulness.

He didn't really think Nancy would listen to it. He just hoped she'd put it on her nightstand and think of him when she glanced at it in passing.

It doesn't matter if Robin is making a face throughout the whole song, or that Steve Harrington annoyingly knows one of his favorite artists, because they're up front. He and Nancy are together, in the back of this car, holding hands in the space between them while The Smiths play. Things are good. This trip is going to be good.

The outlook lasts about twenty minutes. By *Hand in Glove*, Nancy's fingernails are digging into the back of his hand. Apparently not being the one behind the wheel is doing nothing to alleviate her fear of the highway, because every few seconds she squeezes at his hand harder or grasps at her seatbelt like it's going to spontaneously come unbuckled. Jonathan can't really blame her. He's been driving since he was fifteen and he's never felt anxiety like this, even when driving from the monster last summer.

Robin's problem is switching lanes. She does it in a hesitant yet determined way where she puts on her blinker, takes too long to actually switch, and then does it jerkily just as the car that was letting her in changes its mind and starts to speed up again. It makes all of them veer to the left or right when she does it, and four times now they've been honked at. Steve has calmly corrected her a few times. Nancy has not so calmly corrected her more than a few times. Jonathan doesn't even know *why* she's changing lanes this much.

"When's the exit?" Jonathan asks, leaning forward to look at the map still spread over Steve's legs. Steve doesn't answer. Jonathan has to scoot forward even more, straining the seatbelt against his shoulder,

to try and discern where they even are on the route. *Hand in Glove* is on, so it can't have been that long. And yet, it feels like it's been three hours since they left the airport. He's about to ask again when Nancy beats him to it.

"*Steve*." She jostles the back of his seat. "When's the exit?"

"Sorry." Steve murmurs, apparently snapping out of a daze. He bends his head to examine the map and stares at it for a long while before finally announcing, "I don't know."

"Did we miss it?" Nancy demands.

"We missed it?" Robin asks, already adjusting her hand to turn on the blinker.

"No, Robin, don't change lanes."

"What if I can't get over for the exit?"

"If you try to change lanes while there's an eighteen-wheeler beside us, we'll die."

"Um, okay Miss. I Can't Drive."

"You clearly can't drive either!"

"Actually, Robin, I think you should change lanes." Steve suggests, his voice suddenly a lot less teasing and a lot more wobbly. His right hand is bunched tight around the map, crinkling it at the edge. "And maybe pull onto the shoulder."

"Why?" Robin asks, glancing at Steve. They must have the same telepathic communication that Will and Mike used to. Jonathan watches her eyes widen with understanding and she nods. "Yeah, on it."

"There's an *eighteen-wheeler*!" Nancy insists.

"You can't let those intimidate you." Robin says calmly before putting on her blinker.

Jonathan closes his eyes. If he's going to die in a fiery car crash, he doesn't want to look. At least *Hand in Glove* is a good song to die to. Not the best. All he has to go off of is Nancy and Robin's overlapping arguing, a sharp swerve to the right, and the rush of an eighteen-wheeler passing them on the left once they've crossed two lanes. He opens his eyes to the glorious sight of the shoulder as Robin slows to a stop and doesn't even have time to be relieved before Steve is fumbling for the passenger side door and promptly throwing up.

Jonathan leans back against his seat. The upholstery is a lot less luxurious now that a near death experience has made his whole body hot and clammy and the seat sticks to the back of his neck unpleasantly. Nancy is kind of vacantly staring out the windshield, probably making plans to move somewhere with a subway system so she never has to drive again. Robin is already around the car to stand by Steve, who's still puking. Jonathan sighs and opens his car door.

Robin is very casually leaning against Steve's open door with one hand efficiently keeping his hair out of his face. She uses the other hand to gesture at Jonathan, pointing vaguely inside the car. Maybe Steve and Robin forget that other people can't pick up on their brainwaves.

"What?" He asks.

"Water."

He finds that the compartment on his door has been lined with a few water bottles, one of which he tosses to Robin. Steve is now just breathing heavily, resting his face in one hand. Robin holds the bottle up against his forehead without a word. Jonathan can't see how that would do much because it isn't chilled, but Steve lifts his face to show her that he's smiling weakly.

"I think you're getting way better." Steve rasps, wiping his mouth with his wrist. "Just remember that your mirror isn't the only way you should be changing lanes. You need to look over your shoulder, too."

Jonathan can't do this. Not with them. He was kidding himself to think that he could even do it originally, when it was meant to be

just him and Nancy. This whole plan, this whole trip, is just a product of him lying to himself. Things were *normal* in Maine, he was *calm*, and then Nancy called with news of something terrible happening on the other side of the country because Nancy can't just accept normal and calm. And of course he had to go with her! She would've gone alone somehow. She would've flown, or if she couldn't afford a ticket she would have hitch-hiked. There's no stopping her, so he figured he might as well be with her and if they ended up dead in some knock-off Hawkins Lab in Utah then at least he wouldn't have survivor's guilt.

But this is different than he imagined. He didn't even know *what* he imagined. Driving along beautiful scenery with a perfect soundtrack while they pretended to be on a romantic getaway and not a death mission? Whatever it was, it definitely didn't involve Steve Harrington and Robin Buckley and their weird, horrifying way of making everything into one big joke no matter how serious.

"Are you gonna puke too?" Robin asks him. Jonathan's attention drifts back from his mental panic to the two of them, who are looking up at him with matching raised eyebrows. Steve's face is still remarkably pale. Jonathan's isn't like that, is it?

"I just--" He sighs. A glance at Nancy confirms he's getting no help from her. She's still catatonic in the car, now with her arms crossed over her chest. "Are you okay, Steve?"

"Oh, yeah." He shrugs. "I get car sick sometimes. Probably something to do with my brain, I dunno."

"If you're already car sick twenty minutes into this trip, how are you going to make it to Utah?"

"I vote we bench Robin. You can drive fine, Byers, I remember from Starcourt. That was a pretty smooth ride considering the circumstances."

"Yeah, but." Jonathan sighs and presses a hand to his eye until he sees bright red stars. It's November and he's wearing a sweater but he feels suffocated by the kind of heat that always grips him when he's stressed or frustrated. "Look, I can take you back."

Steve frowns. “That’s dramatic.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, Steve, I mean,” Robin chimes in, surprising Jonathan and apparently surprising Steve too, “is it?”

“Wh--you want to go *home?* I thought you were okay with this!”

“I am! Of course I am, I’m just saying, like--” Robin looks up at Jonathan, meaningfully flickering her gaze from him to the car. “Give us a second here, Byers.”

Jonathan gets in the car. Nancy glances at him, apparently not ready to speak yet. Now *I Don’t Owe You Anything* is playing, but it’s low enough for Jonathan to still hear the conversation taking place outside the car even after Robin has closed Steve’s door and Jonathan compliantly closing his own.

“--your relationship with them justifies this?” Robin is asking, demanding, when Jonathan decides that eavesdropping isn’t a crime and tunes into the conversation. “I just don’t *get* it.”

“I told you about what happened two years ago.” Steve replies. He’s talking about that night at the house. He told Robin about that? And is that his reason for coming now? Jonathan had kind of assumed Steve was coming for the same reason Jonathan was: to keep Nancy safe. But *them* implies Jonathan is involved too.

“But that was two years ago, Steve. And what about everything else?”

Jonathan wonders what everything else is. Steve must shrug or make some quiet, dismissive noise, because the next voice is Robin’s again.

“You don’t have to explain it to me.” She says, making him strain to hear because her voice is suddenly softer. “You know I’ll still go with you, anywhere. But if you’d like to tell me why you’re willing to like, go through absolute hell for them, I’m all ears.”

Jonathan listens closely. The sound of traffic is picking up outside as a sudden string of cars pass and for some reason he wills them to slow down because he feels it’s vital to hear this. Probably more out

of a sense of nosiness than anything, but still. He leans slightly toward the door and hears Steve laugh, quiet and somewhat forced-sounding.

“If you think this car is hell, you should’ve been with the kids when Max was driving. Talk about traumatic.”

And just like that, he’s getting up and opening his door to pop his head back in. The color is coming back to his cheeks and from the grin on his face you wouldn’t be able to tell he was just violently sick on the side of the highway. Somehow his hair has already fallen back into place.

“Byers, are you driving or am I?”

2. Chapter 2

Nancy knew they shouldn't have invited Robin Buckley.

Not that she did invite her, really. She just allowed her to invite herself. Ultimately it comes down to Nancy not being able to drive, because if she could drive it could have been just her and Jonathan switching off. No need to involve Steve and absolutely no need to involve Robin. And even if she *does* feel slightly more comfortable with the idea of four people in a sketchy hotel room hundreds of miles away from home as opposed to a more vulnerable two, it's starting to feel like it really isn't worth it.

Already things aren't going according to plan. The formal plan, which everyone knew about because she made sure to tell them before they even left, was to reach Jefferson City by tonight. It's a good eight hours from home, meaning they'd be making good time to stick to the schedule of driving there for two days, staying for a max of four, and driving back in another two. It's safe, according to Mom's Indiana travel book written in 1979, so she'd chosen it over the slightly closer towns for the sake of peace of mind. It had all been so carefully constructed in her head and yet now they're barely even near the state line and they're already behind schedule.

The informal plan, which Nancy never articulated to anyone besides her journal (which now has six pages full of details integral to this trip), was for things to be easier than this. For Jonathan to be sitting beside her in the back, not up front with Steve because Robin wildly overstated her own driving ability and Steve's brain is apparently too fragile for backseat movement. They were supposed to have time to stop and stretch their legs and get lunch and plan things out even more specifically with the mental clarity that you only have once you're knee-deep in reality and there's no going back.

But Robin invited herself.

"I don't think we have time to stop for lunch." Nancy announces strategically nearly an hour after they're back on the road. She knows at least one of her fellow passengers is going to complain about this, and it's not like she's thrilled about it either. All she'd eaten that

morning was two granola bars and some of the grapes from the fridge that were still slightly too sour to be any good.

As expected, Robin groans. “Seriously?”

“If we stop, we might not make it to Jefferson City.”

“So we’ll be like a half-hour outside of it. Who cares?”

“We’ll all care when we’re in a gross motel that doesn’t change the sheets because we’ll have to scramble to find one in a city we haven’t researched.”

Robin’s been looking at her this whole time, which Nancy has been avoiding reciprocating. It’s not that Robin Buckley intimidates her in any way, not at all. She had French class with her in sophomore year, actually. They never really talked, because Madame Caron seated everyone alphabetically so Robin was near the front and Nancy was in the back corner, but Nancy was aware of her presence. She was the only other person in class who was any good at French. But that had never intimidated her, because Robin’s test grades didn’t take away from Nancy’s test grades, and even now there’s no reason to be intimidated.

It’s just that Robin is different. After Barb, there were only two people in school who could even bring themselves to look Nancy in the eyes--the two currently sitting up front. Even her teachers couldn’t really look at her for more than the few seconds it took to hurriedly assure her that late assignments were understandable. It has pissed her off. It still does. They spent the first full week after Barb went missing looking at Nancy through narrowed, suspicious eyes because somehow (Tommy H. and Carol) everyone knew about her and Steve the very next day. Like *that* was what was important. And the second week, when Will came back and Barb didn’t, suddenly the judgement was gone and so was the ability to even look in her direction.

She’d sort of thought that would follow her forever. High school reunions would be pointless because everyone else would be chatting about their careers and she’d still be Nancy Wheeler, best friend of local dead girl Barb Holland, eternally sixteen years old and grieving.

Robin doesn't do that, though. She didn't do it the first time Nancy went into Scoops Ahoy and watched Steve immediately duck into the back either because he was avoiding her in general or he was avoiding her seeing him in the sailor suit. Robin had looked Nancy directly in the eyes and said, monotone and bored, "Hey. What can I get you?"

That was before she even knew about the Upside Down. At that point, she still thought Barb died from a chemical leak. Sometimes Nancy wonders if somehow Robin *did* know, like deep down, because what are the odds that she was the only person who didn't flinch away from it and also the second most unlucky person in the world who would eventually get roped into the truth all because she just so happened to work with Steve, the first most unlucky person in the world?

It should maybe help Nancy feel closer to Robin, the fact that she knows about all the shit that's happened and that she treated Nancy like a human even before that. For some reason, though, it doesn't. Nancy did all her close bond forming in 1984 and it's not easy to just…pencil someone in.

"You've like, never traveled before, have you?" Robin asks now, condescending for no reason. That might be another reason Nancy doesn't feel close to her. Robin seems to hate everyone but Steve.

"Neither have you, Rob, to be fair." Steve says from the front. He twists around in his seat to face them and shrugs. "I, for one, don't have to eat any time soon. In fact I probably shouldn't."

"So I have to starve because your weak little stomach can't handle any Mcdonalds?" Robin groans, kicking the back of Steve's seat weakly.

"Um," Jonathan reaches over to turn down whatever Smiths song is playing on the radio, "I didn't really eat at the airport."

"Why not?" Nancy asks, betrayed.

"It was like, six dollars for a sandwich." He makes eye contact with her in the rearview mirror and grins in exasperation after only six

seconds of her looking back unflinchingly. “I mean, I can settle for gas station snacks *if* we find somewhere really good for dinner.”

“I really don’t see how going through a drive through is going to compromise the trip.” Robin mutters, slouching in her seat in a way that’s eerily reminiscent of Mike. Jonathan glances back over in the rearview mirror, like he wants to see if she’ll give in. She’s not going to give in.

“Well if it was a *trip* then, yeah, I’d risk it. But it’s not a trip for me, it’s kind of more serious than--”

“Jesus, alright.” Robin concedes before Nancy can even finish, which is doubly annoying because it’s like she’s just avoiding the argument completely instead of actually hearing it. When Nancy looks back at the mirror, Jonathan’s eyes are back on the road. He doesn’t turn the radio back up so now it’s just quiet instrumentals mostly drowned out by the sounds of the highway and the silence of no one knowing what to say.

Steve turns in his seat again, less so than before because now he’s only addressing Robin. Like he’s trying to patch up some of the tangible tension in the backseat, he jostles Robin’s knee and offers, “I’ll share gummy worms with you.”

Robin’s arms are crossed over her chest. “You’re eating all the green and orange ones.”

Nancy’s mood doesn’t improve until two hours later, when they pull over at a rest stop and Jonathan’s driving shift is officially over for the time being. She doesn’t have to pee so she’s sitting on one of the picnic tables scattered around the grassy area surrounding the little building and watching Jonathan make his way back from the bathroom. It’s a nice rest stop. Tucked away from the highway enough to feel peaceful and right up against a line of trees that remind her of home. Nancy decides to sit facing the trees. Every time she looks at the highway she feels her anxiety spike, seeing all those cars blurring past and realizing how fast they’re actually going. Mom had tried to comfort her once at the very start of her driver’s ed by pointing out the dozens of cars lining the block as they walked to Melvald’s and saying, “Look, if *all* these people can drive, why can’t

you?"

It had not been comforting.

"It actually wasn't that gross." Jonathan announces once he's close enough to not have to yell over the sound of the highway. He sits on the other side of the table. She'd hold his hand, but they're both in his lap. "But I feel like that's going to end up being rare."

Nancy shrugs. Their vacations are usually to Florida beaches, which are far away enough to justify flying every time. She can't really imagine being on a road trip with Mike and Holly for longer than the two hours it takes to reach Nana's house and not wanting to jump out before reaching their destination. Which means Robin was right. She knew something about Nancy without explicitly being told.

"Beats Murray's place." She says, settling to knock her knee against his under the table if she can't hold his hand.

"You *didn't* like the posters of Reagan positioned directly above and across from the toilet to remind you that the government is always watching even when you think you have privacy?"

"I was thinking more about the sink that only had scalding hot water."

Jonathan smiles, looking vaguely off into the distance like they're reminiscing something sweet leftover from childhood and not the deranged living conditions of the man they went to for help in exposing the government. That's just their life, though, and it's comforting. Comforting that they went through it together.

"You're done driving, right?" She asks despite having heard him and Steve agree upon it when they'd parked. She glances off in the direction of the rest stop and sees Steve and Robin already returning, walking slowly and listlessly bumping into each other more times than is probably possible to happen on accident.

"Yeah. Steve said he'd go the rest of the way to Jefferson City."

"If we make it." Nancy mutters, suddenly feeling the relief that she had a few more moments alone with Jonathan turn into an

annoyance that they're walking so slowly. For the sake of utilizing these moments, she cracks on her resolve to not think about it anymore and quietly says, "If we hadn't stopped for so long before, we wouldn't have to--"

"Nancy." Jonathan abruptly cuts her off, probably paranoid that they'll be overheard despite Steve and Robin still being a good thirty feet away. "We'll make it."

Jonathan very strongly believes in picking your battles. It's not like he's fully non-confrontational--he *did* give Steve his second concussion--but he carefully considers when the situation calls for confrontation. Apparently this isn't one of those moments. Steve and Robin are within earshot so Nancy can't even justify to him why she chose this moment, and the moment in the car, and he's already getting up from the table anyways.

It's much better in the backseat with Jonathan. She can lean her head on his shoulder and ease some of the aching in her neck from sitting for so long. They've circled back to Fleetwood Mac, though Jonathan asks to skip *Landslide* again in the bizarrely solemn way that leaves no room for argument. Nancy falls asleep to *Monday Morning* and wakes up to a car door shutting and a sky that's suddenly tinted with some pink.

Jonathan's shoulder is still under her cheek. It feels notably sharper than it had before, and if anything sleeping with her head at an angle only really made her neck hurt more. Nancy sits up and tries not to groan.

The driver and passenger seats are empty and there's yellow fluorescent light breaking through the rear window, spilling onto the whole backseat.

"You can go back to sleep." Jonathan murmurs, shifting his position for probably the first time since she dozed off. "We still have another hour."

"Where are they?"

"Bathroom. The rest stop was like, three hours ago. Are you, like,

dehydrated?"

"No. I'm trying to stick to a schedule."

"Well unless the car explodes or Steve stops following the map, we're gonna make it. Probably before it even gets fully dark."

"Good." Something does seem to click into place in her brain once she has assurance that they're back on track. The little spike of worry won't go away completely until they're laying on hotel beds in Jefferson City, but an hour isn't the longest she's had to spend with some anxiety settled over her shoulders like bricks.

"I am hungry though." Jonathan says after a minute of silence.

"Yeah but if we'd stopped for lunch, it'd be dark by the time we got there."

"I know. Tomorrow, though. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

The muffled sound of Steve's laugh chimes somewhere behind them. Nancy slumps back into a semi-comfortable position and rests her head back on Jonathan, resolving to spend the next hour asleep so the possibility of the car exploding or Steve getting lost doesn't actually start manifesting in her mind.

"If everyone makes an effort." Nancy mumbles just before both of the front doors are yanked open in perfect synchronization. She shuts her eyes before the car is cranked again.

Sleep doesn't come as easily this time. The sun is gradually lowering and thus positioning itself to shine directly through the windshield, making all the darkness Nancy had when she closed her eyes before suddenly orange-ish. Steve and Robin are playing the license plate game in the front. Jonathan doesn't seem particularly engrossed in the game, but at one point he does point out an Alaska plate which Robin groans about because apparently that somehow puts him in the lead. Steve argues that Jonathan can't be in the lead after only finding one plate. Robin tells him that it's not just any plate, it's Alaska, a high-ranking plate worth at least ten points, and that's when Nancy tunes them out and lets sleep claim her in receding

waves until the car is suddenly stopped.

“This place looks sketchy.” Steve is saying when she rubs her eyes and sits up. They’re parked in front of a tiny roadside diner, in a parking lot that’s mostly loose gravel with no lines painted anywhere. There are three other cars that she can count scattered around the small lot, two of which are pick-up trucks and one of which is missing a bumper. The building itself is built from white cinderblock with peeling red paint proclaiming that it’s called **PALMER’S**. She highly doubts whoever Palmer was still owns the place or is even alive, because it looks like it’s been standing since the 40’s. Steve’s right. It looks sketchy.

“That’s how you know it’ll be good.” Robin assures him, unbuckling her seatbelt already and opening her door. Nancy realizes that she could’ve found somewhere to eat in advance with Mom’s guidebook and avoided the whole possibility of risking getting food poisoning or having their car jacked at this random dive off the highway. It just didn’t occur to her. By the time she’s scrambled out of the car, Robin is already on the raised curb of the building with her hand on the door.

“Hey.” Nancy grabs her attention and meets her eyes over the roof of the car. “Should we maybe keep looking?”

Robin turns her head to peer through the glass door of the diner. “It looks fine to me. There’s a family with kids in there.”

Nancy glances back towards the road. In the distance she can see the nest of lights that must be Jefferson City, the actual *city* part where there are more people and cars and witnesses. “I just think we could fine somewhere more…populated.”

Robin drops her hand from the door and brings her arms up to cross over her chest, taking a step down from the curb to meet her at the car. Steve and Jonathan are out of their seats now too and they all stand at their respective doors, looking over at each other like the roof of Dad’s Dodge Challenger like it’s their roundtable.

“Wheeler, I have eaten exactly one omelet and two bags of gummy worms all day because you insisted we get to Jefferson City tonight

and now we *are* in Jefferson City and we're at the first available place that serves food. I'm not seeing the problem."

"I'm hungry too, okay?" And Nancy *is*. She hadn't realized until she stood up and immediately got all the little white bursts of light in her vision that pop up every time she's gone too long without having anything to eat or drink. "But this place looks like somewhere teenagers would last be seen in a horror movie."

"It just needs a paint job." Jonathan offers. When she looks over at him, she finds that he's begun inching toward the diner. He shoots her a look of desperation. "Nancy, seriously. I can't sit in the car anymore without eating."

One reason Mom and Dad always said they avoided car trips was because no one could ever agree. That's mostly Mike's fault. He's the pickiest eater in existence and complains when he has to eat something he's not entirely sold on as if it's literally poisoning him. Nancy had always hated when they had to find somewhere else just because of him.

And now Robin, Steve, and Jonathan are all looking at her like they're awaiting her signal to immediately make their way inside and she doesn't want to be a Mike about it, so she sighs and concedes, "Fine."

If she ends up in the trunk of a car in the next two hours, she's going to be pissed.

Dinner is quiet. They ordered so many red plastic baskets of burgers and fries and onion rings that the newspaper clippings under the foggy glass of the table are covered completely and everyone is more preoccupied on eating than trying to make conversation. The food *is* good, admittedly. Nancy always thought that greasy food would taste bad by default, which is why she avoided eating at Benny's no matter how many times she would accompany Steve there post-basketball game victory. But there's currently burger grease dripping down her wrist that she's no longer bothering with wiping away because every bite just produces more and the burger is probably the best she's ever had. The fries are just as good, so much so that she's not even waiting for them to cool before shoving them in her mouth as fast as she can.

Mom would definitely scold her for this. Not just for stopping at a desolate diner off the highway in Missouri, but for eating like there's no one around to see it. Especially in front of Jonathan. But Mom isn't here and Nancy feels a slight liberation in knowing that she won't be for the next week.

"Oh my God." Steve throws his head back to rest on the booth and closes his eyes. "This is so fucking *good*."

"It's kind of tragic how good it is." Robin agrees, tearing open another tiny packet of ketchup and drenching the remaining pile of fries in her basket with it.

"Tragic?" Jonathan asks.

"We'll never eat here again." She explains, looking up. "We'll crave these burgers at some point and have no way of getting one. We might even crave the way these lights are too bright and the vinyl on the booths is cracked and cutting our legs open but like, we'll never find anywhere else exactly like this place."

There's another silence. Steve and Jonathan seem to be contemplating it. Nancy looks around at the surrounding ambience and thinks it's a little...strange. To be romanticizing a place like this. The food is good and she feels strangely calm sitting here despite being terrified of everyone inside twenty minutes ago, but it's just a diner.

"I stand corrected, then." She offers. "This place isn't so bad."

"You never answered my question from earlier." Robin says, her voice suddenly less wistful and filled with a purpose. She's sitting up straighter and leaning across the table to examine Nancy in a way that makes her feel acutely uncomfortable, like Robin is somehow seeing everything she's ever done wrong and is about to announce it to the table. "Have you travelled a lot?"

"We go to Florida a lot. To the beaches. And to visit my grandparents in Ohio."

"So like, some." Robin assesses.

“Yeah, some.” Nancy watches Robin nod and take in the information. Steve and Jonathan don’t offer any personal contributions. To fill the resulting silence, she asks, “Have you?”

“I’ve never even been out of Indiana.”

“You have now.” Steve points out, tapping his soda cup against her shoulder like he’s trying to do a cheers to her expanded horizons but doesn’t want to wait for her to lift her own cup.

“You’d *never* been out of the state? In seventeen years?” Nancy asks, somewhat shocked. Robin was the one speaking with so much surety all day, deciding twenty minutes ago that the best diners are the ones that look semi-unsafe. For some reason she’s always seemed so much more...experienced. With everything.

Robin shrugs. “Nowhere to go. All my family lives in Indiana. My parents think vacations are a waste of money.”

“This is only like the third time I’ve left Indiana.” Jonathan offers. There’s a pause when Jonathan realizes that everyone is waiting for more, so he lowers the cup he was about to sip from and continues, “My mom really likes taking vacations but, uh, money. So it’s kind of a rare thing.”

“My parents go on vacation all the time but they stopped bringing me when I was like, ten.” Steve chimes in. “And before that it was always to really boring places for a kid to go to like...they brought me to the Bahamas but to a private resort so all there was to do was sit in the room or go sit on the beach by myself.”

“That must have been so hard.” Jonathan says in a voice so sincere that Steve doesn’t immediately catch the sarcasm. His eyes flicker up when it clicks in his brain and he meets the small, timid grin Jonathan always wears when he’s teasing. Steve laughs and flicks a fry at him. It’s something Nancy has never seen before Steve and Jonathan before, a sudden spark of familiarity that can’t have formed in the car during the three hours she slept.

“It *was*, okay, I got really sunburned.”

“Aw, Steve got sunburned.” Robin coos, reaching over to touch his face until he ducks away the best he can while cornered in the inside of the booth.

“I won’t get sunburned on this trip. Pros of a winter getaway.”

“Yeah you’ll just puke your guts out from being in the car for half an hour.”

“That’s in the past now. The worst things always happen at the beginning of a vacation, y’know, like the time my mom drank the whole--”

“You guys didn’t…” Nancy speaks before even knowing how to phrase the question. She doesn’t want to sound accusatory or cause any problems, especially not when they’re all starting to actually talk for the first time since the morning, but there’s a nagging feeling that’s been accumulating in her stomach all day at every stop and this discussion has just amplified it and she needs to *know*, “You didn’t come just to ditch Hawkins, did you?”

Steve’s grin from the start of his anecdote is slowly fading as he processes the question and Robin’s grin has been wiped away instantaneously because she seems to have her mind made up on exactly what Nancy meant. Still, she asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean I didn’t mean to make you think that this was going to be fun.”

“We know it’s not gonna be fun, Nance.” Steve tells her, already using the voice that he always uses when she has a valid reason to be upset and he’s just going to act like she needs to take it easy and stop bringing down his mood. “We’re just trying to not focus on the depressing shit.”

She’ll never understand it about Steve. She’ll never understand how he can look directly in the face of tragedy and just shrug and look away. It’s even more baffling that he’s found Robin, who apparently can do the same thing, and that they’re both so deeply invested in this strategy that they’re looking at her like *she’s* crazy. She’ll also never understand why it works and starts to make her doubt herself.

“Well that *was* depressing, so,” Robin pivots to get out of the booth, “I’m gonna go make a selection on that jukebox and subject the whole diner to it.”

“I’ll contribute to the cause.” Steve says, scooping up the few quarters of change he’d left on the table and sliding out of the booth after her with one more quick, unreadable glance in Nancy’s direction.

She leans back against the seat and looks down at the remaining half of her second burger, which she thought might not be enough when she’d ordered but now isn’t actually hungry for. Jonathan also has a good portion of his own burger left that’s now sitting untouched in his basket. Right when she notices it, Jonathan pushes the basket away and scoots over to stand up.

“I’m gonna get some air.”

This is just like dinner at home. It used to always be Dad who said something to provoke an argument, but as Mike’s gotten older it’s become a fifty-fifty chance it’ll be either of them. Nancy always hates them for the rest of the night, sometimes bleeding into the next morning. She never understood why Dad couldn’t just pick up on what made people upset and decide to leave it alone. Like, if you ask your wife why she cooked the steak like this and she ends up in her bedroom five minutes later, you realize that was a bad question. You don’t ask it anymore.

But in this situation, Nancy was technically the one who said something that disrupted the flow of dinner. She just needed to know that Steve and Robin and, potentially, even Jonathan weren’t only here to humor her. The fact of the matter is that she approached them with the information on what was happening in Utah, they all acted like she was crazy for even noticing something was wrong, and now they’re all here pretending it’s a vacation. They don’t believe anything bad is happening.

It drives Nancy crazy. Just like Dad, they refuse to notice the trend. Every year people act like Nancy is crazy or delusional or paranoid when she brings attention to something and *every* year, she’s right.

She throws the remaining half of her burger in the trash on the way

out the door. Jonathan is standing against the hood of the car, hands shoved in his jacket pockets like they always are because he doesn't know what else to do with them, looking up at the sky. He doesn't seem to notice Nancy approaching until she's directly in front of him, and when he looks at her it isn't at all like the way he did this morning.

"You're annoyed." Nancy deduces as he's already looked back up. She glances up too. There are less stars here than there are in Hawkins. Way less. They're too close to a real city. She levels her gaze back on him and asks, "Why?"

Jonathan sighs. "I'm not annoyed, Nancy. I'm tired."

This is one of Jonathan's worst qualities. He's never just honest about he feels while there's still time to do something about it. He decides that his feelings are too ugly to be spoken into broad daylight so he bottles them up until they explode via him punching Steve in the face (though that was deserved) or yelling at her in the car after they'd just been fired.

"You can just tell me." She offers. There's twenty seconds of silence which she can tell is making him uncomfortable, but not uncomfortable enough to say anything. But it doesn't matter if he vocalizes exactly how he's feeling because she already knows. Seeing as he won't admit it, she can fast-forward to defending herself. "Look, I know you all think I'm just picking fights or whatever but I'd rather have Steve and Robin be mad at me than have them get to Utah and walk right into danger because they're too busy having fun to realize something real is going on. That's what happened to them at Starcourt."

Jonathan finally looks at her, incredulous. "How do you know what happened to them at Starcourt? They won't talk about it."

"Dustin told Mike who told me. They didn't even realize it was connected to the gate at first, they were just pursuing some dream of being American heroes and uncovering a secret."

"Okay but now they *do* know this could be connected to the gate."

Her heart sinks. “*Could* be? You don’t believe me.”

“Wh--Nancy you said yourself that there’s a *chance* this could be related.”

“Yeah well apparently everyone else interpreted that as a really low chance, but I don’t think people going missing and blackouts is something we should assume isn’t connected!”

“Earlier in the car, you said it’s not a trip for you.” Jonathan says. She’d forgotten, honestly. “You didn’t say for you and me, you said for *you*. Like you already made up your mind that I wasn’t on your side after I already flew here and lied to my mom and--”

“I didn’t mean to say that.” Because she really, *really* didn’t. She knows Jonathan cares. Even if for some reason he’s not convinced that anything connected to the lab is happening in Utah, he cares about the slight chance that maybe something is. That’s how they operate. They don’t look the other way. She reaches over to take his hand so he knows she means it when she says, “I know you’re on my side.”

He looks at her. His hand is interlocking with hers automatically but his expression is still distant from what it was earlier. After a few seconds he turns his head back to the diner and Nancy follows his gaze. Steve and Robin are dancing inside. The two tables of people are glancing at them over their shoulders but they’re either oblivious to it or don’t care entirely. Steve has his arm extended so Robin can twirl under it and they’re both laughing.

For some reason it makes Nancy’s chest hurt to watch, so she looks at the ground instead.

“Can I ask you something?” Jonathan’s voice is calmer now, steadier. “And you can’t get mad at me for asking.”

It’s easy for Jonathan to make demands like that because even if he *were* to get mad, he wouldn’t tell her. Still, she nods. “Yes.”

“If we get to Utah and things aren’t what we thought they were--like, if the missing people turn up fine and it’s just a shitty electrician

botching everyone's wiring--will you be happy?"

"Of course I'll be happy."

"It would mean you're wrong."

"Jonathan, if I'm wrong about people *dying*, of course I'm fine with being wrong."

And that's the truth, isn't it? Every night since she first saw the news report, she'd laid awake thinking about Barb's parents. Somewhere in Moab, Utah, there's a carbon copy of the Hollands sitting on their couch surrounded by every picture they could dig up from storage of their child who they can only pray is out there with absolutely no idea where they really are or what's really happening to them. It made her want to call them the first night, just to hear Mrs. Holland's voice and prove that she was still alive. It seems impossible that they're still alive, after all that. Nancy had been bracing herself that whole year for the night she and Steve rang the doorbell and waited on the front porch for hours before some well-informed neighbor wandered over to tell them that the Hollands just couldn't take it all. She didn't expect them to commit suicide or even die from a broken heart the way dogs sometimes do. It was more just the thought that grief might make them stop existing. Like, if you spend every moment of your existence drowning in grief, at what point does your life stop being a *life*? And then at what point do you fade away?

So, yes, she'd rather be wrong than have someone in Moab ask themselves the same questions. But there's a third option, too. There's a scenario where she *is* right, but their involvement actually works. They arrive in Moab and get proof of the lab's involvement, call Owens or Murray or whoever will help and get the whole thing blown wide open, and *because* of that no one dies.

They could save people. That's what she wants.

"I just couldn't live with myself if I ignored this." She tells him quietly. "I mean, if someone thought there was a chance that Will might go missing two years ago, wouldn't you have wanted them to warn you?"

“Yeah.” Jonathan concedes. “And that’s why I’m here.”

He squeezes her hand. It’s not perfect. After arguments she’s always left feeling like the other person didn’t quite understand what she was trying to say, either because she can’t ever find the words to completely explain herself or because they just aren’t hearing them. This wasn’t even a real argument. The start of one, maybe, but it fizzled out before it could leave either of them actually angry.

They’re just tired. Despite sleeping in the car for so long, Nancy is tired. She doesn’t understand how Steve and Robin aren’t.

They come outside after ten minutes. Nancy has hopped up onto the hood, using the windshield to recline against, and it takes so much effort to get herself fully vertical again that she’s certain she’ll fall asleep instantly no matter how shitty the hotel beds are.

She half-expects Robin to say something. Not Steve, because he never reopens a cut after it’s closed up. But she prepares herself for either another provoking comment or maybe even a small apology and winds up with neither. Robin climbs into the passenger seat with her soda straw in her mouth and doesn’t even look in Nancy’s direction.

Her and Steve are truly soulmates, it seems.

The hotel beds *are* shitty. At first it looks like they might not be because they’re the kind that shake if you cough up a quarter and Nancy thinks a massage might actually feel amazing right now, but it turns out the shaking is not at all comparative to a massage. It feels like when Dad would rattle the end of her bedframe on Saturday mornings when she’d slept in too long.

Steve and Robin love it, as expected.

“If only we’d known. We could’ve split the quarters equally between the jukebox and the beds.” Robin sighs remorsefully, sitting on the edge of the bed she and Steve have claimed in the oversized Vanity 6 tee-shirt and boxer shorts that appear to be her pajamas. Nancy wonders how she acquired the boxer shorts. Like, did she buy them herself with the intention of wearing them as pajamas? Why would she even think to do that?

They do look comfortable. The room is warmer than Nancy thought it would be and she has to push her cotton pajama pants up to her knees to be semi-cooled down.

“Next time. Or we could DIY it.” Steve says. He’s standing at the foot of their bed, brushing out his post-shower hair very carefully before turning around and grabbing at the end of the mattress, shaking it a few times while Robin laughs.

“I’m gonna shower next, if that’s okay.” Jonathan says, mostly to Nancy but also glancing at Robin for her approval. Robin gives him a thumbs-up. Jonathan just barely grazes Nancy’s shoulder with his hand and asks, “Nancy?”

“Yeah. I showered this morning.”

He gathers his pajamas and heads toward the tiny bathroom near the door. Nancy should probably wait until he’s back to fall asleep, just in case he has a preference on which side of the bed he sleeps or something. This is the first time they’ve actually shared a hotel bed. It feels foreign, slightly like they’re breaking a rule despite having shared their own beds at home dozens of times before.

She’s exhausted, though. She settles on allowing herself to close her eyes for at least a few minutes, but just as soon as they’re closed Robin is suddenly directing a question at her.

“Did you guys fight?”

Nancy opens her eyes. Robin is now laying on her stomach, chin propped on her fist. Like they’re at a sleepover discussing boys. The question isn’t posed with any hostility. Just a genuine curiosity, perhaps so she can keep track of how tense the car will be tomorrow.

Giving her the benefit of the doubt, Nancy shakes her head. “No. We just talked.”

“Hm.” Robin squints. “You just seemed...tense.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

“Now? He just...asked me if he could go next in the shower and I said yes.”

“Yeah and it seemed tense.”

Nancy looks at Steve for clarity. He makes eye contact with her in the mirror, back to working through his wet hair, and gives her an innocent shrug. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

Which is bullshit--he was. Nancy doesn’t know what else to say. Robin apparently isn’t determined to help her understand, either, because she’s flipped over onto her back and closed her eyes. Just like that. She just offered her assessment unprompted and failed to provide any further insight.

Nancy manages to stay awake until Jonathan returns, smelling like apple shampoo and the hotel soap that’s more chemicals than scents. He apparently doesn’t have a preference on which side he sleeps, or maybe his preference is the side she’s already left open, because he collapses into bed without any fuss. On his stomach, like always.

“I’m so tired.” He murmurs, voice muffled by the pillow he’s shoving his face into.

“Me too.” Nancy murmurs back, turning on her side to face him. His eyes are closed. There’s nothing tense about the way they are right now, laying inches apart and seconds from falling asleep together. Maybe to other people they look a certain way, but that doesn’t matter. They understand each other.

Nancy falls asleep without even realizing that they never kissed goodnight.

Notes for the Chapter:

> https://blacklivesmatters.carrd.co/
>
> donate, sign petitions, use your platform. if anyone dm's me proof of donations on tumblr (@steveharrington) ill write you something at least 1k words

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

hahahahahaha surprise im doing this again!

It's too early to be awake, let alone lugging her suitcase across an empty hotel parking lot, but Robin is getting accustomed to doing things she doesn't want to do.

Yesterday she'd starved inside Nancy Wheeler's dad's Dodge Challenger that smells too strongly of men's cologne, which she knows is a fault of the car and not of the occupants because Steve's cologne is much less overpowering and Jonathan Byers does not strike her as the type to overdo it on cologne. She'd listened to the fucking Smiths for hours on loop, only occasionally being saved by Fleetwood Mac but for some reason having to skip Landslide every time or else Byers would have a heart attack in the back seat as if good music personally offends him. She'd been nearly forced to leave the first chance at sustenance they'd had all day until Nancy finally backed down on something, and then had that meal ruined when Nancy decided that backing down on the diner meant she simply *had* to reassert her position as Captain of the Road Trip by reminding Robin and Steve that they weren't taking this seriously enough.

Robin doesn't know why Nancy hates her so much. Steve had insisted that she doesn't hate her, last night when they were dancing in the diner to Elvis, but Robin can tell. She just wishes she knew what she did so wrong.

"It's hard for Nancy to open up to people," Steve had said while they flipped through the songs in the jukebox and tried to find one that would most convince everyone else in the diner that they were on a Bonnie and Clyde-esque escapade and the two other moody teenagers sitting by the car were their getaway drivers, "even before all the crazy shit happened."

"I don't need her to open up to me." Robin had huffed. There had been too much jazz in the jukebox and she doesn't know how to dance to jazz. "I'm not trying to learn her life story here. I'm just

trying to get her to stop accusing me of sabotaging the trip."

"She's just stressed. When Nancy gets stressed it kind of comes out like she's mad at you, but she isn't really mad."

"Well maybe she should work on controlling that." Robin had reasoned, glancing outside where Nancy and Jonathan stood by the car and talked with expressive hand gestures, "Otherwise her and Byers might not make it."

At that point, Steve had pointed enthusiastically at the song she'd left off on and insisted, "That one!"

You're the Devil in Disguise is a pretty good song, actually. Uncle Thomas is one of those freaks who's weirdly obsessed with Elvis to the point of taking a yearly trip to Graceland, as if it's ever going to change, and every Christmas she just gets him some junky mug or tie from the record store on Main. This Christmas she might get him an actual album or something.

She wishes they had another tape. Even Fleetwood Mac is getting stale. Convincing Nancy to stop somewhere and browse through tapes is clearly not an option, though. There are little tape displays inside every gas station they stop at, but sorting through them takes time and their stops are always limited to about five minutes. Robin misses Steve's BMW so bad it almost hurts.

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asks Steve for the sixth time as they work on shoving every suitcase back into the trunk, trying to replicate whatever formation they managed to make it all fit yesterday.

"Positive." Steve grunts through the effort of shoving a dark blue duffel bag with a Star Wars pin adorning the front down as far as he can manage. The car dips down with a creak and Steve hastily orders, "Okay, close it, close it!"

Jonathan slams the trunk closed before the duffel has time to puff back up. It stays closed, miraculously. They both exhale sharply, their breaths forming little white clouds in the morning briskness. Jonathan looks up and offers *again*, "I can go for at least the first hour."

“Dude I don’t want to tell you your business, but if it hurts now it probably won’t get much better if you start off straining it.”

They’re talking about his back. Apparently over the summer while Robin and Steve were being interrogated, Jonathan and Nancy were…fighting their boss? Or something. The details were told to her only once and that was in the Starcourt parking lot, when she’d been concentrating on not puking up the rest of the drugs in her system. It’s too late to ask now, she figures. The gist is just that someone slammed a metal stool into Jonathan’s spine, which left him with five weeks of physical therapy and a lingering problem with back pain whenever he stays in one position for too long. A road trip really seems like a horrible idea, knowing that.

“In the back you can at least sort of change positions.” Nancy chimes in.

Jonathan looks like he’s starting to regret ever speaking up this morning. He’s not the first naive, innocent acquaintance of Steve’s to be caught in his irreversible trap of caring too much—and he won’t be the last. Robin is just glad to see him nod his head in surrender, otherwise they’d be standing here all day. She’s also glad that she gets to spend another few hours at least riding shotgun while Steve drives, because if Nancy and Jonathan are really quiet she can almost pretend they aren’t there and it really is just a trip.

They keep playing the license plate game. Robin is keeping tally on a napkin from Palmer’s. Currently she has 24 points, putting her in second place in comparison with Jonathan’s 28 and Steve’s 16. If Jonathan just hadn’t found Alaska she’d be winning. Not that there’s anything to win. It’s a pointless game, but this is how she’d always pictured it.

Mom and Dad don’t really do road trips. Or any trips. This had apparently been shocking to Nancy, but Robin doesn’t see what’s so strange about it. What compels people to spend thousands of dollars at a time just for one week? Steve had described it as the need to just get away. Get a break from routine.

Robin does want to get away. More than anything, her whole life, she’s wanted to get away. But she’s not stupid enough to think that

staying in hotel rooms for one week qualifies as “getting away” because really, aren’t you just with the same people? Doing the same things? Besides, it’s not the place that’s even the problem. Robin would be perfectly content to stay in the same house forever and never step foot outside of Hawkins if only other circumstances would change.

She should’ve trusted her sophomore year intuition. If she’d kept on avoiding Steve Harrington for the rest of her life, going away to college would be so easy. Every June she leans against a locker and watches the seniors file out of the school for the last time, watching the girls hold their friends’ hands and wipe tears away while the guys nod at each other like they’ve just taken down a Roman city or something. It never struck her as genuine. They were just aware that everyone was looking at them in that moment. They forced some tears and tried to look profoundly affected by it all because they wanted people to feel sorry for them.

Graduating seniors are the last people Robin would ever feel sorry for. Below arsonists, probably.

But now Steve exists in her life and going away doesn’t seem so simple anymore. Now she’s actually leaving something in Hawkins. Not to exclude her other friends and her parents on their good days and her cat, but those are all things that seem manageable. She’d lived with her parents and her cat her whole life, so she can handle only seeing them on weekends for awhile. She can make new friends at school who make the absence of her old ones hurt less.

Unless she’s going to end up being interrogated by foreign war criminals with any of these new friends, though, no one is going to fill the void Steve is leaving behind. Or rather that she’s creating by leaving *him* behind.

“Jesus Christ, asshole, if you’re gonna change lanes fucking *signal!*”

Steve lays on the horn for five seconds and promptly changes lanes to get around the Toyota that just cut them off only to slow down the moment it was in their lane. The driver flips Steve off as they pass him. Steve doesn’t return the gesture, which Robin thinks might be a semi-recent development in his personality caused by his awareness

of the kids who are usually in his backseat.

“You know, you’d probably honk at me.” She points out. Forgetting to signal is definitely something she’s had to work on.

“I would never do that to you.”

“Well you wouldn’t know it’s me.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Steve reasons. “I’d see your Woodsy Owl bumper sticker and think, oh, this person cares about the environment, so even though they just cut me off at least I know they’re not a complete asshole in every other aspect of their life.”

She does have a Woodsy Owl bumper sticker. It seems a little counterproductive, a little oxymoronic in nature, to put a sticker telling people not to pollute on a car that she’s started taking to work instead of her bike, but it was only 80 cents and matches her Woodsy Owl shirt.

“Well maybe that guy had a progressive bumper sticker.” Robin twists around in her seat to find the Toyota again. It’s now back in the original lane it started in, probably just to annoy Steve, but it’s just slightly too far back for her to see the bumper.

Jonathan, however, can see it perfectly. “It says ‘the worst day of fishing beats the best day of working.’”

Steve scoffs. “See? Asshole.”

“How does that make him an asshole?” Robin demands. This always happens. She challenges him on something she doesn’t really care about, just to annoy him, and then she ends up actually invested. Her competitive nature is to blame, probably.

“Guys who like to fish are assholes.” Steve says, shrugging as if this is just a law of human nature and there’s just nothing to be done about it.

“My dad fishes.” Nancy points out.

“No, your dad *says* that one of these days he’s going to take Mike out

for a father son fishing trip and Mike spends the whole day complaining about it and then it never happens because Ted forgets or, like, realizes he doesn't own a boat. I'm talking about guys who actually fish."

"What about guys who hunt?" Jonathan asks, sounding weirdly genuinely curious about Steve's perception of men based on their hobbies.

Jonathan seems alright so far, if Robin is being honest. Not that she'd ever particularly had an issue with Jonathan before meeting Steve--if anything, she kinda liked him in school. They never actually talked or even knew each other's names, but he was always around band practice or soccer practice or drama club because he was on the newspaper. He'd slink around the perimeter and take his pictures quietly. That's all it took for Robin to feel relieved when he walked through the door as opposed to the other newspaper photographers who cycled through. Everyone else always made Robin feel watched and analyzed, which was something that made her skin crawl in high school, but for some reason Jonathan never did. She never felt like he was paying attention to anything other than his camera and what he could do with it.

Unfortunately, his camera and what he *did* do with it sort of soured Robin on him once Steve gave her the abridged history of Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan. He'd really glossed over the fact that Jonathan was in his backyard taking pictures through his bedroom window. Robin wishes Steve could acknowledge that his former asshole tendencies don't mean that for the first sixteen years of his life he was never wronged, and if he was he must have deserved it.

Bringing it up always just makes Steve go into his sad reflection on high school mode where all he does is stare vacantly into the distance, so she avoids it. But it bothers her, sometimes, that the story as it's been recounted to her by Steve and Dustin never really includes a part where Jonathan Byers apologizes for taking creepy pictures or giving Steve a concussion or, though this is technically unproven so far, sleeping with his girlfriend before Steve even knew they had broken up.

This trip is making her think that maybe Jonathan does feel guilty

over some of that. She's seen him let go of Nancy's hand when Steve glances into the backseat, noticed how they didn't kiss goodnight when Steve was standing at the mirror spritzing chemicals into his wet hair. Even if he hasn't verbally rehashed whatever happened between all of them, Robin thinks Jonathan is trying to make it clear to Steve that he doesn't hate him. He keeps shyly extending the olive branch without knowing that Steve is months past even seeing the need for one.

"Guys who hunt can go one of two ways." Steve says matter-of-factly. "Either they're assholes, like fishing guys, because they get this weird enjoyment out of killing animals and they think that makes them super badass or something, or they're actually one of those weirdos who don't trust supermarket meat so they shoot their own and use every part of the deer because they respect it or whatever. Obviously the second guy is better. Just kind of weird, but not an asshole."

"Yeah, but," Nancy inches forward in her seat, a big change in interest level from yesterday when she spent the whole car ride either brooding or asleep, "wouldn't the second type of guy also fish?"

Steve pauses. "Uh--"

"They would." Nancy continues. "If there are these two types for men who kill animals, why wouldn't the same concept apply to men who kill fish?"

"'Cus if someone's gonna go all out and live off the grid and catch their own food, Nance, they're not gonna settle for some fish."

"That doesn't make any sense. It's the same exact concept."

"My brain hurts." Steve announces. He always does that when he's run out of arguments to make.

Today feels better than yesterday. Even after Steve refuses to elaborate on his categorization of men, the conversation is steady and free of hostility. Robin wonders if Jonathan maybe gave Nancy a nudge in the right direction last night outside the diner. She was hoping someone would, but clearly coming from herself or Steve it would have only made Nancy more upset.

This feels more like her hopeful vision of the trip. The scenery is unchanging for the first few hours as they leave Missouri--a lot of trees. They're different from the trees in Hawkins, though. Instead of miles and miles of pine, there are sprinkles of wider trees that cast giant circular shadows beneath them, trees with branches that tangle together above the trunks. Despite being well into November, some of them still have a few leaves clinging stubbornly to the branches. In Hawkins, the trees give up and shed their leaves the moment the temperature drops below fifty. It's almost like everywhere else they've been is a little more alive than Hawkins.

They stop at a diner for lunch after four hours of driving and talking. Nancy looks vaguely distressed the entire time they're waiting for their food, but ultimately it only takes ten minutes for their orders to come to the table and then fifteen minutes for them to eat. The burgers here aren't as good as Palmer's, but the fries are better. They're sprinkled with something that makes them spicy but not so spicy that Robin can't stand to eat them. It's not the food that draws her to these roadside diners, anyways. It's something about what's inside of them.

It's hard to describe. She'd tried it, last night, and Nancy had looked at her like she was crazy. Steve and Jonathan had just looked confused. Maybe it doesn't make any sense, but Robin likes the idea of visiting someplace that means something to other people, especially if the other people are few in number.

Clearly this diner means something to people. The residents of--actually, Robin has no idea where they are. Somewhere in Kansas now. The residents of this little town somewhere in Kansas have left napkins with crayon drawings up on one wall of the diner, almost taking up the entire space. The customers filtering in are people on their lunch breaks, people much more put-together than they are with their messy hair from sitting in the car and their comfortable, practical clothes meant for being cooped up all day. People in scrubs and fancy blouses and uniforms for other tiny businesses here are chatting with each other. Even if these people don't really think of this place as something meaningful, they will someday.

It's how Robin feels about Benny's. She ate at Benny's after every soccer game with her teammates. When Beth's shin bone broke out of

her leg, they'd brought Benny's takeout to the hospital room and all tried to focus more on sharing curly fries than the fact that they all knew what Beth's bone looked like. Mom and Dad used to take her there when she was younger and Mom could still stomach fried foods without spending the rest of the night regretting that she strayed away from her new diet of salad and oatmeal. If someone had saved the little placemats she was given to draw on as a child, they'd probably find a progression from wobbly crayon letters barely spelling out her name right to a nice, cleanly printed *Robin Buckley*.

She'd never thought about all this until Steve told her what happened to Benny. At first she was angry that he did. Maybe bad things had happened in Hawkins, and maybe Steve had to suffer from the knowledge of it all, but why should she? Why should he force that burden onto her without even asking, without realizing that just because he didn't remember her from high school doesn't mean she wasn't there. She'd lived in Hawkins all her life, longer than Steve had. It had seemed so wrong that he so thoughtlessly ruined the memories she had of Benny's and of the middle school gym and of the old junkyard where she and Mary Waverly played pirates and Robin realized for the first time that Mary Waverly was the prettiest pirate on the seven seas.

But Robin couldn't stay angry with him. How could she, when she sees people wearing the little blue and white ribbons pinned to their shirts or putting the lawn signs in their yards that are supposed to show support for everyone who died at Starcourt and wants to rip them down? They have no idea what they're even mourning for. And Robin can't tell them.

If she had the opportunity to take Mr. Cleveland from next door aside and tell him that the sign in his yard is actually mourning people who died because the government decided they were worth the risk, that the search party he joined for Will Byers two years ago was incited by those same assholes who just didn't learn their lesson from it, that the entire town he lived in was soaked to the roots with blood that they'd been lead to believe was spilled on accident, wouldn't she?

Robin doesn't sleep in the car. It feels good to be away from Hawkins, and she doesn't want to miss any of it.

It does get boring after Jonathan and Steve switch off on driving, though. Not only is she banished to the backseat, but Steve immediately falls asleep the second he's benched. This moment was coming. Robin knows it's been lurking around every corner of this road trip, waiting to be sprung on her, and now it's here. She's truly alone with Jonathan and Nancy, and none of them know what to do about it.

It turns out the answer is simply to do nothing. They don't talk for the first half hour that Steve sleeps. Nancy is somehow reading without having to stop immediately from an oncoming headache, a talent that Robin has never been able to accomplish despite years of trying while Mom ran errands. Robin is coming to terms with the fact that if anyone is going to start a conversation, it's going to have to be her when Jonathan suddenly speaks up. He keeps his voice quiet, possibly for Steve's benefit, and the question is seemingly directed at Robin when he asks, "Weren't you in Coach Highsmith's third period class?"

Robin glances at Nancy again just to confirm that he is indeed asking her. Nancy looks up from her book just long enough to arch an eyebrow at Robin, probably because Jonathan is waiting expectantly for an answer and instead she's just staring at Nancy.

"Uh, yeah. Freshman year."

"Yeah, I thought so." Jonathan nods. "This is probably weird and, uh, three years late, but I thought your photography portfolio was really good. The one picture of the hands was cool."

Robin barely remembers that class. Applied Arts was one of those classes that was just kind of nothing in the grand scheme of her entire education. She can't recall one thing she learned. Every few weeks they'd study a different medium of art and then do a project over it. The idea was to learn the history and cultural relevancy of what they were practicing, which is why she'd taken it to fill an elective spot, but it turns out a baseball coach with a few free periods to teach might not be the best source on that. The pottery lesson had been kinda cool. Robin completely forgot they even did photography. She has no idea whose hands she photographed.

Jonathan does, apparently.

“Oh.” She laughs a little, then stops laughing because it might seem like she’s making fun of him. “Well, thanks. I didn’t really know what I was doing.”

“I think that helps sometimes with photography.” He says thoughtfully. “When people know all the ‘rules’ or whatever they just get stuck making the same product over and over.”

She desperately tries to remember what Jonathan’s project had looked like. She can’t. “Yours was really good.”

He shrugs. “I just used whatever was due in newspaper that week.”

Robin is feeling very triumphant. She was dreading this alone time with them, desperately clinging to Steve as her safety line even if it meant following him into a rest stop when she didn’t need to pee, but here she is doing perfectly fine. Having a pleasant conversation with Jonathan Byers about photography.

Then the car starts smoking.

“Um.” Jonathan says as one solitary puff of smoke seeps out of the hood and dissipates behind them. They all keep watching for more, but there isn’t any. Just the one little burst several yards back on the highway. “That’s probably not good.”

“Maybe it’s just because it’s cold?” Robin suggests. Her experience with the old hand-me-down Chrysler that Dad got insanely cheap from a co-worker hoping to dump it and its shaky steering wheel on some unsuspecting teenager with cheapskate parents is that cars sometimes just do weird things. It used to freak her out every time. After at least four separate occasions where she’d pulled onto the side of the road and begrudgingly called Dad to report whatever was happening only to be told that it’s *fine* and not to call his work phone, she’d learned that nine times out of ten, it’s fine. Unless she sees flames, she keeps driving.

Jonathan doesn’t seem as convinced. He’s changing lanes suddenly, hands tighter on the steering wheel. Nancy seems even less

convinced. She's gripping her seatbelt like they might spontaneously be ejected from the car.

"I think we should check, at least." Jonathan mutters. "Even if--"

Another burst of smoke, this time emanating from both sides of the hood, swirls up and glides over the windshield. Robin and Nancy simultaneously curse, Nancy choosing a much stronger word, which makes Steve stir in his seat.

"What's going--oh, shit." He sits up fully.

There's now a steady stream of smoke pouring from both sides, obscuring the view of the road in front of them. This is likely not because of the cold. It's weird, though, because the smoke is a milky white instead of the dark gray that she assumes would be the result of the engine being on fire or something. The radio is clearly still working, too. Right as Jonathan slows to a stop on the shoulder, *Landslide* starts playing.

Jonathan turns the car off quickly.

Steve pops the hood and leans back in time to avoid inhaling the gush of smoke that rises out of the car like they've just performed an exorcism on it. The boys look into the hood, leaning over it to poke at certain parts and mutter between each other about what might be the problem. Robin figures they should be able to just see which part the smoke is coming from and deduce that that's the problem, but when she joins them in peering in it's impossible to tell. Smoke is just sort of streaming out, though it's slowing now that they've come to a stop. Nancy has grabbed the map from the passenger seat and has it unrolled on the roof of the car.

"I think we're in," Nancy squints at the red line she's drawn, "Collyer."

"Never heard of it." Robin looks down the highway in both directions. There's no one in sight. There's actually *nothing* in sight, no matter which direction she turns. The highway is sandwiched between two fields that seem to stretch on forever with row after row of indiscernible crops bowing under the gust of cold air that sweeps

over them. It seems like there should be a barn within view, or at least a scarecrow or something. Who planted these crops? And who harvests them? Nature didn't put them into tidy little rows on its own, but she can't shake the feeling that they're the first and only humans to ever be in this exact spot. "Seems like no one has."

She's getting the little spike of anxiety in her stomach that used to be reserved for taking math tests or visiting the doctor until Starcourt happened, where forever after it happens much more frequently and the attempts of her brain to reassure her that everything is fine are answered with a reminder that it's not *always* fine. Nancy looks up from the map. She must have the same spike. Robin wonders which horrible thing that Nancy experienced in the last three years made her realize that sometimes you have to listen to the spike.

"What's wrong with it?" Nancy asks Jonathan and Steve, who have their arms crossed over their chest or their hands on their hips like they can just discipline the car into working.

"Well nothing's on fire." Jonathan responds with certainty and then promptly shuts his mouth because that is apparently the only thing he's certain about.

"I don't understand, my dad *just* bought this car. It was expensive."

"He hasn't had any other problems with it?"

"None that I know of. I mean, he wouldn't have let me take it if he thought this would happen."

"No one's driven by this entire time." Robin reminds them. There's a little audible anxiety in her tone which she would normally try to cover up. It's too cold and empty to pretend like this isn't bothering her, though. Her cheeks are starting to hurt from the wind that keeps whipping into them. "We'd have to walk for help."

"And leave the car?"

"We'll split up." Steve says, taking a few steps to close the gap between them and slinging an arm around her shoulder. The extra warmth he's providing is nice. The way his thumb is comfortingly

rubbing at one spot on her upper arm is even nicer. “Nance, you said we’re near a town. Robin and I will just go find it and bring back someone with a tow truck or whatever.”

“And if something goes wrong?” Nancy challenges.

“What’ll go wrong?”

“Steve--” She starts, saying his name like a sigh. Not just any sigh, either. A deeply exasperated sigh that seems to come from deep within her chest.

“Look, we don’t have any other options.” Steve points out. “You want the car to explode?”

“It’ll be fine.” Jonathan says, still looking under the hood so it’s impossible to tell who he’s trying to reassure. Robin doesn’t feel completely reassured by any of it--not by Steve’s reasoning or Jonathan’s calmness or the logical voice in her head that says there’s astronomically less danger in walking down a highway in the middle of the day in Kansas than there was in invading a Russian base.

“If you walk for too long and can’t find anything, come back.” Nancy instructs. “And don’t get lost. Follow the highway.”

“Oh, I thought we’d wander around through the cornfields.”

“Steve, shut up. Take the map.”

Steve takes the map. In a way, this is exactly what Robin wanted when she’d agreed to coming on this trip. Her intentions had been to stay with Steve no matter what. This is exactly how the deck was stacked over the summer, anyways: Robin and Steve together, Nancy and Jonathan together. So why does it feel wrong to split up?

She almost feels like she should say something, but it would be ridiculous. They’re leaving for, at most, an hour. In the middle of the day. In Kansas.

“If the car starts smoking again try to get out of the blast radius. Sit in the cornfield, have a snack.” Steve advises. He’s doing the thing he usually reserves for the kids where he papers over his obvious

concern with a joke and thinks no one will notice. Robin sometimes wonders if other people *do* notice, or if it's one of those things that only she'll ever look close enough to see. It works both ways. Steve is the only person in history to ever call her out on her habit of widening her eyes when she's lying to appear convincingly innocent.

Thinking about all the ways Robin and Steve know each other better than anyone else helps ease the panic a little. They wave goodbye to Nancy and Jonathan and there's a split second where Robin feels like she should say something meaningful, just in case, but no one else does. She's beginning to learn that she should just take their lead on this kind of stuff. After all, she's only been around for one measly monster fight. They've all had three. It stupidly feels like when she first joined the soccer team a month late because Coach Keener wanted her to play badly enough to be willing to wait for her sprained ankle from the prior summer to heal. She'd been careful in the locker room and on the field to do exactly what everyone else did, not wanting to stick out too much.

Sticking out too much meant people looking at you. People looking at you meant people finding things out about you.

Hypocrite that she is, she's been watching Nancy and Jonathan. Trying to figure out how they work and what's so special about them that's earned Steve's heartbreak for a whole year and a half. She figured it could be a fun way to pass the time on this trip, like the license plate game. It could also be a fun way to pass the time on this impromptu hike.

"So Nancy and Jonathan are acting pretty weird, right?" Robin offers. They're well away from earshot of the car by now, but Steve still glances back, paranoid. When he seems content with their privacy, he looks back at Robin with genuine surprise.

"How's Jonathan acting weird?"

"Not Jonathan, like, himself. I mean as a couple. NancyandJonathan."

"Oh." Steve looks even more surprised. "Are they? They're talking normally, I thought. They shared their bed last night."

“Yeah but they didn’t--” Robin stops herself just in time. Maybe it’s not Steve’s business that Nancy and Jonathan didn’t kiss last night before bed. It’s definitely not Robin’s, but too late for that. She’s always been nosy, but not maliciously. She never sets out to learn someone’s secrets or invade their privacy. It’s always more like an unconscious thing, listening to people’s conversations the one listens to music faintly playing in a department store. You may not even register what song is playing, but you’re hearing it. And when it *does* register that what she’s done is probably considered spying by a lot of people, Robin feels adequately shamed.

“Didn’t what?” Steve asks.

“Didn’t uh, stay in the diner.” She finishes. That was common knowledge, right in front of both their faces for them to see.

“I don’t think that means anything.” Steve says, kicking up loose gravel with the scuffed toe of one Nike shoe. In Click’s class she used to stare at his shoes because his right leg was always bouncing and the movement made an annoying squeaking sound as the back of his shoe met the metal leg of his desk and she would try to summon telekinesis to make it stop. It never worked, but she did always take note of how his shoes always looked brand new, no matter how much time had passed. Free of scuff marks, perfect bright shoelaces, no mud or dirt in the soles. “Nancy and Jonathan just kinda operate differently from everyone else. Like, when we were dating, I always felt like I should take things more seriously. I figured it would make Nancy like me more. And I must’ve been right, because Jonathan does that.”

“Yeah but Jonathan doesn’t have your hair.”

“He has *hair*, though, he just doesn’t know how to treat it.” Steve huffs, apparently feeling a very real frustration about this. “Sometimes I think about how easy it would be to tell him. Just casually in the car be like, Jonathan, man, you don’t need to be using repairing shampoo and conditioner because your hair isn’t damaged.”

“Maybe get some credentials first and he’ll listen. Cosmetology school.” Robin suggests idly. Beside her Steve throws his head back to look at the cloudless sky.

“I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“I knew at some point this trip would bring us to the topic of college.”

That catches her off guard. Robin has talked about college at least five times a day for the past…since they met. He knows how badly she wants it. At least she thought he did. It’s pretty obvious to everyone who’s ever talked to her about it, to the point where the Jacobsens from across the street put any college mailers they get for their daughter in Robin’s family’s mailbox. And if they know it from a few conversations at block parties, Steve should know it. Steve who knows everything about her.

And if he *does* know, then she’s pissed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize my future was so irritating.”

“It’s not *your* future that’s bumming me out, Rob, it’s mine.”

She considers it. On the one hand, yes, she knows that the topic of time progressing isn’t Steve’s favorite. It’s the one thing he talks about when he’s drunk and then pretends he never did once he’s sober. It’s all over his face the first night after his parents return from a long business trip and his father expels weeks of pent-up considerations on how and why is son is such a deadbeat. In his own words. She understands that it probably hurts to hear about.

On the other hand, if Robin could stop the flow of time, she would. Maybe after this trip is over, though. If she could erase the numbers used to mark the time, the years, the ages that people turn and the expectations that come attached to every birthday candle, she would. That’s how much she owes Steve and that’s how willing she is to repay him. But she can’t, and since she can’t, she might as well acknowledge it. Face it head on.

It’s like driving. She hasn’t asked Nancy upfront about why she’s afraid to drive. She hates Robin enough as it is. If she had to guess, though, she’d assume the answer would be something about how many fatalities there are yearly on Indiana highways. And like, Robin

took driver's ed. She knows. She watched the videos and handled the rising nausea afterwards. But unless technology progresses like fifty years overnight, there's no getting around it.

You have to drive. You have to think about the future. You just have to.

She must have been thinking about this for too long, because Steve breathes out an agonized, "Okay, sorry. You can talk about college from here until civilization, if you want."

"Thanks for your permission." She says, a little crossly, because another fact of life is that when you get dragged along on a miserable road trip for your friend's benefit, you should be allowed to talk about whatever you want to talk about.

"I'll get the ball rolling. Are you gonna live in one of those dorms with the gross hall bath or are you gonna use part of your food budget to secure a personal?"

"Hall baths aren't that gross for girls, we aren't animals. And you know what? Why's it okay for Dustin to talk about MIT every day of his godforsaken life but *I* can't talk about Berkley?"

Steve is quiet for a moment, seemingly thinking of a response and leaving just the sound of their shoes scuffing against loose asphalt to fill the space, before pointedly saying, "I object."

"What?"

"Not all men's bathrooms are disgusting, you *know* I clean mine like every week and it's organized so--"

She shoves him as hard as she can to the side, into the road, half hoping an eighteen-wheeler will barrel by and flatten him. Unfortunately the hardest she can shove him isn't very hard and this road is apparently entirely deserted. He recovers gracefully and has the audacity to *laugh* at her attempt.

"Okay, seriously." He clears his throat. "It's different because Dustin isn't even halfway through his freshman year and you're leaving in like, what, nine months?"

“Ten.”

“November is almost over. I’m not trying to make you feel like you aren’t allowed to talk about it.”

“Okay so what was the end goal when you groaned and threw your head back like I was about to sentence you to fucking death?”

“Well, alright, maybe my nap was interrupted by the car exploding so I did that without thinking and now I feel like a douchebag. But I sincerely deeply humbly apologize.” He bumps his hand against hers and Robin feels a brief burst of superiority over Nancy and Jonathan. This is how simple it is! You say what’s bugging you and the other person says what’s bugging them and you work it out. The feeling fades when she remembers that Steve is the first person she’s ever been able to communicate with without trying so hard. And still, she has some things to get straight.

“It’s not like I’m excited to leave you.” Robin feels like this is stating the obvious, but Steve looks over at her with an expression that means maybe it isn’t. “Of course I’m not, idiot. You’re like the main reason I’d ever come back.”

“What about Jonesy?”

“He likes my dad way more than he’s ever liked me. I don’t get up early enough to feed him. It’s just--” She sighs, decides to break the seal, “at Starcourt I was, y’know, pretty sure I was gonna like die or whatever. And I was thinking like, fuck, I’m gonna die never having left the state of Indiana. How is that fucking possible? Like at my funeral they’re not gonna be able to use the usual words they use to describe people. How can they call me ambitious or curious about the world or whatever if I’ve stayed in this fucking state all my life?”

“It’s not like you had a choice.” Steve points out. “Traveling is dependent on your parents when you’re seventeen.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I have to go to college.”

“Is that a building?” Steve points ahead and slightly to the left. She follows the direction and has to stand on the tips of her toes to see,

just barely visible above the rows of corn and what seems like a world away, a tin roof. Whatever it is, there's a chance it's heated inside. The very thought almost makes her stinging cheeks hurt even more.

"It kinda looks like an axe murderer might live in there." She comments, lengthening her stride and picking up the pace to match Steve.

"At least if we're chopped up we won't be cold anymore."

They half-jog the rest of the way in silence, more focused on how much it hurts to breathe this heavy when the windchill is under forty than talking. Or maybe Steve is used to it because sometimes she'll come by his house early in the mid-morning and find that he's already gone for a run around his neighborhood like a freak. Maybe he isn't talking because he's contemplating exactly what he'll do once she's gone to California and he needs a new best friend. The windchill gets even colder and for the last few yards they fully run, blurs of green on either side and the highway gravel crunching under the soles of their sneakers.

The tin roof covers what appears to be a cafe with the world's best kolaches, or so the hand-made sign in the front window says. Despite being out in the middle of nowhere, there are a good amount of cars in the parking lot. There must be homes somewhere, though Robin can't see them in any direction.

Her nose is running after the jog and she needs a second to catch her breath before waltzing into a public area. She watches Steve similarly compose himself, though his chest isn't exactly heaving the way hers is, and still doesn't react quickly enough to him suddenly wrapping both arms around her and resting his forehead on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry." He murmurs, pulling back so the next part isn't muffled into her coat. "I know you have to go. I'm just gonna miss you."

"I'm gonna miss you too, dude. But we'll still be together, y'know, in spirit. And we can call."

"Yeah." He smiles halfway. She tries to mirror it. They both know it's

bullshit. The two miles of telephone wire they just ran past is only the smallest little centimeter of zig-zagging cords across the country that make talking to someone in Indiana from California possible, but it really doesn't help all that much. Talking on the phone is good for asking how someone's day went. It's not good for waking up at three in the morning from a nightmare and needing to hear Steve's voice, uninterrupted by static and bad connection.

It's not going to be the same, and Robin hates it. She hates that she has to leave and she hates that they both understand that she has to leave. If there could be a bit more poetry to it, a sense of unfairness and a reason to believe it was all out of their control, maybe it would be a bit more bearable. But it's entirely in her control and they know it and they can't do anything other than sadly smile in front of a random cafe in Kansas.

"Let's go in."

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> hehe um sorry it took so long once again but you know.....life <3 talk to me on tumblr @steveharrington if you want!

It's blissfully warm in the diner and Steve is glad. One time he and Tommy were debating the effectiveness of study tricks that could get you A's on every test without requiring even the bare minimum effort put into actually learning the material. Tommy swore that falling asleep with an old documentary about the Civil War on in the background got him a passing grade on his history final. Carol said that was a load of horseshit, but that it was scientifically proven studying in one kind of environment and then taking the test in that same environment helped you recall the information easier. Like, she said, if you study while it's cold as balls in your room and then take the test while it's *also* cold as balls in the classroom, you'll totally remember what you learned. Tommy asked her scientifically proven by who? Carol said scientists, dipshit.

Steve never tried it because that method still involved actually studying, which kinda defeated the purpose in his opinion, but he thinks maybe the same idea will apply now. He and Robin talked about sad shit outside in the cold, but here in the warmth it'll all just fade away.

"They have barbeque!" Robin is looking at the big painted menu over the counter instead of looking for someone to talk to. He can't really blame her, though. They had a hasty hotel breakfast of those fake scrambled eggs and a stale bagel that the two of them split, but that was hours ago and they just exerted a bunch of energy.
"I don't have my wallet." He realizes, which, fuck. What if he needs to pay a towtruck driver or something? Or would that be after the fact? This entire trip, Steve has tried to ignore the fact that he's nineteen years old and has never traveled by himself before, never even really traveled by car before, and now it's becoming harder and harder to ignore as he becomes increasingly worse at handling the situation at hand. "Do you have yours?"

“Nope.” She sighs. “Maybe they’ll give us some complimentary food because we’re like, weary travelers?”

“Pretty sure Nancy and Jonathan would be kinda pissed if we eat a whole meal while they wait at the car.”

“It’ll give them more time to work out their drama!”

The girl working at the counter looks over at them, clearly weirded out by how long they’ve just been hovering at the doorway and staring in her general direction. Steve elbows Robin before she can keep arguing and makes his way towards the waitress. She’s about their age, maybe a year older than him. She’s wearing red lipstick with matching red hoops that are sort of tangled up in the frizzy blonde hair falling to her shoulders and when she gives him a cheery customer service smile he can see a tiny smudge of lipstick on her front tooth. It’s comforting, for some reason. For the past hour he’s been worrying that Collyer isn’t even a real place with real humans like an episode of *The Twilight Zone* or something. Her nametag says Cathy.

“How are you today?” Cathy asks.

“Good.” Steve lies. “How are you?”

“I can’t complain. You two ready to order?”

“Um, actually we kinda just came to the first place we saw. Our car broke down like, a mile or two down the highway.”

“It started *smoking*.” Robin interjects, which makes Cathy’s two red lips part in apparent shock.

“So we were wondering if you could tell us where the closest mechanic is that we could walk to?”

“Well I don’t know if it’ll be a very easy walk, but there’s one closer to town.” Cathy reaches over to yank a napkin out of the little silver holder on the counter closest to them and produces a Sharpie from her apron pocket. She leans over so they can all look together as she rights down a list of instructions, starting with **1. Go straight for abt 3 miles** which makes Robin quietly mumble a solemn, “*Fuck*.” Cathy

looks surprised, like they maybe don't have that word in Collyer, Kansas.

"I don't know if I can walk three more miles." Robin tells him, direct and honest. "And I don't really think you should either, in this weather."

"What?" Steve is automatically offended at the suggestion. "Why *me*?"

"The last time you had a cold your lungs were all rattly, Marlboro boy."

"That's how *everyone's* lungs are when they have a cold!"

"Not me, my lungs don't rattle."

Cathy looks amused by this exchange and there's a raspy chuckle from the old guy sitting at the closest barstool, making Steve feel effectively ganged up on. Robin really likes bringing up the smoking issue when it has absolutely nothing to do with whatever else is going on. He should've brought Jonathan or Nancy. Before he can come up with one of her bad habits to throw back at her, there's a voice that matches the chuckle suddenly reaching across the counter to them.

"A mile or two away, you said?" The old dude asks. Steve has never been good at talking to old people. In his experience, they're either really nice or really mean. Not that he can blame them, really. The older you are, the more dead people you know, and that'll make anyone cranky he figures. Robin knows his feelings on this particular issue, so she does the talking for him.

"Yeah, we walked for about twenty minutes. Then ran a little at the end for, what, like five minutes?" She looks at Steve for confirmation. He nods. Old guy shifts his eyes from Robin to Steve, then down at his plate of what appears to be a turkey sandwich, then shrugs at no one in particular.

"I got a hitch on my truck. I could give you a ride back to the car and tow you to the mechanic."

“That sounds--” Robin starts to eagerly agree and Steve has to catch at her wrist and squeeze before she can finish.

“Uh, give us just a second.” He tells the guy. It’s probably rude to act so outwardly jumpy in front of someone offering help, but Steve can’t really bring himself to care at the moment. Robin is too trusting. Too eager to jump from point A to point B in whatever little mission she’s on, no matter how she gets there and how safe it is. He has to drag her a couple feet away, towards the vacant booths at the other side of the diner, and give her an exasperated look. “I left my bat in the car.”

“Oh, please. He’s being nice!”

“Yeah or he’s *acting* nice.”

“You sound like Nancy.”

“Well Nancy has never ended up in the trunk of someone’s car!” Steve insists. He could also add that Nancy has never ended up tied against his back in an underground Russian facility, but that would mean talking about it twice in one hour and walking three miles honestly sounds less taxing. Plus, it doesn’t really technically apply. It’s not like the Russians ever acted under the pretense of kindness.

“Look, I’m not walking three miles in the middle of nowhere in the freezing cold when we have someone offering us a ride.” Robin insists. “And we’ll be together! If something...happens, we’ll figure it out like we always do.”

Now he really *could* bring it up if only to point out that this time around Dustin is at home in Hawkins, not anywhere near them with an electric cattle prod, but he decides to accept that she isn’t budging on this. If he gets murdered by this old guy, at least it’ll absolve him of years of built up guilt for avoiding old people.

The guy’s name is Lloyd, apparently, which Cathy calls him with familiar ease like she knows him. That helps calm Steve down a little bit. He’ll miss Cathy. For someone he’s never met before in his entire life, she’s really good at easing his anxiety.

“I like your earrings.” He tells her on the way out, a sort of exchange

for her effort in helping them.

Lloyd's truck is parked right by the door. They hadn't paid any attention to it when they arrived, mostly because they were too wrapped up in being cold and emotional to take in their surroundings, but it's a nice truck. Definitely older, but kept up with. There's a sticker on the back window that has a symbol of two crossed axes and a firefighter's hat in the middle. Robin notices it, too.

"Are you a firefighter?" She asks in the briefly awkward moment where both of them hesitate to take the passenger seat before eventually just mutually slipping into the back. Robin has a way of just talking to anyone as if they've known each other for years. Except him, when they'd first officially met at Scoops, but to be fair she thought he was an asshole. She was right, too.

"Was for thirty-five years." Lloyd confirms. His raspy voice is kinda nice to listen to, really. He should do books on tape or something. Steve watches him crank the car and pull at the gear shift with ease, bringing the hum of the heater along with it. He's always considered himself more of a winter person than a summer person. Summer brings humidity that fucks with his hair and mosquitos and long, boring days laying on his living room floor. That was before fall and winter became monster season, though. He also thinks maybe winter wasn't so bad because he always spent it inside, with heating and a generator just in case the power went out during snowstorms.
He figures Lloyd is okay with heat. Being a firefighter and all. And just like the lipstick smudge, it's the kind of thing that makes him feel a lot safer in this guy's presence. Firefighters don't kidnap teenagers.

"Did you like it?" Steve asks, trying to be friendly and not ageist. For a second he worries that he's probing at a sore spot. Maybe one of his fellow firefighters died on the job or something and that's why he quit or maybe--

"Loved it. If they let me keep doing it forever, I would."

The difference between what Steve expected and what Lloyd said seems meaningful, but Steve can't sort out why at the moment. He just knows that it's nice. He wished they, however they are, would let

this dude keep fighting fires forever. Robin leans forward in her seat to inform Lloyd that her uncle is a volunteer firefighter and he informs her that they need those now more than ever, especially in small towns like this, and Steve watches the corn blur past until the plume of smoke that is Ted Wheeler's car comes back into view.

"Well look at that." Lloyd murmurs. Nancy and Jonathan were sitting in the grass, using what appears to be someone's jacket as a sort of makeshift picnic blanket, and they both look slightly uneasy until Steve opens his door and steps out.

"Hey, we found someone to help." He rushes to explain Lloyd's presence before Nancy can react the way he initially did at the diner. She looks skeptical, but still shoots a pleasant smile over Steve's shoulder and steps forward to greet him. Jonathan gets up after another second, grimacing as he does so. "Your back okay?"

"Fine." Jonathan responds without looking at him, focused instead on giving Lloyd a look that's far more skeptical than Nancy's, which is surprising. "Where'd you meet this guy, exactly?"

"A diner. We were asking for directions to a mechanic but it would've been a three mile walk so Lloyd offered. He was a firefighter."

"Was?"

Steve shrugs. "He's old now."

Jonathan doesn't look any more convinced. He doesn't even bother to cover it up like Nancy had when Lloyd steps forward to shake his hand. Steve thought Jonathan, lover of practicality and reasonable problem-solving, would be happy with this solution. Instead his face is all scrunched up, like he just tasted something bitter and the flavor is lingering on his tongue.

"Doesn't look good at all." Lloyd observes after all the introductions are done and he's peering into the car with one hand running over the gray stubble on his chin. He's short, Steve notices. A head shorter than him, but it could be partially the way he stands a little hunched over. He looks like what Steve pictures when he thinks of farmers. Plaid shirt, overalls, boots that look like they're meant for more than

a checkered diner floor in the middle of the day. He looks up at Steve from the engine and it's the first time he really sees his face full on. His eyes are half-lidded at all times, but they're kind.

The last time Steve saw his grandfather was four years ago. One of them died when he was five, leaving just his father's father who lives in Florida like all old people do--except Lloyd--and doesn't call much. He sends checks for Christmas and Steve's birthdays, intermittently. He forgets some years and that's fine. Steve feels weird spending money that comes from someone whose face he can't remember. Nancy is really close with her grandfather on her mom's side. He's one of those progressive, hippy-sort of old people who actually seems to like every new generation of people. Steve met him once, at the Wheeler's Christmas dinner.

Steve had just been getting used to feeling an overwhelming, burning sort of jealousy towards every aspect of Nancy's family. Meeting her grandfather undid all the progress.

"Do you think it's fixable?" Nancy asks, wringing her now-gloved hands together as Lloyd finishing hitching the car to the back of his truck.

"Can't say for sure. We'll have to see what they say at the shop. Everyone pile in, now. Someone'll have to sit up front."

The four of them look at each other. Before, riding up front with just Lloyd seemed awkward and scary but now Steve realizes the alternative option is sitting squished in the back bench with two other people. And although the ride to the mechanic probably won't be that long and Lloyd isn't exactly swerving through lanes, riding up front *does* decrease the likelihood that Steve's brain will rattle around and make everything all swirly and stomach-churning. Like all things, though, he realizes this too slowly. Robin has already raised a hand and offered, "I can DJ. Do you have any tapes?"

He does have tapes. A whole leather book of them, which Robin flips through languidly with her legs stretched in front of her while Steve sits with his knees too high, sandwiched between Jonathan and Nancy. The way they parted and automatically went to opposite sides of the car is sort of alarming.

“Bookends!” Robin exclaims when she reaches the end of the tapes. Steve doesn’t know what Bookends is, but he recognizes the music that starts slowly drifting from the crackly radio up front. It takes him a second, but he can place the song. *Let us be lovers, we’ll marry our fortune together*. He knows the song from Dustin of all people. Dustin’s mom, to be precise. She plays it on their Magnavox.

The ride to the mechanic does turn out to be short. Quiet, too, because Lloyd and Robin seem content to listen to the tape and no one in the backseat feels like talking. It’s weird. Steve thought maybe this little trip would help him get closer with Nancy and Jonathan. He could prove that he’s over being sad about the way things went and they wouldn’t feel the need to walk on eggshells around him. Really, though, he has no earthly idea what’s going on in either of their heads. They’re both hard people to read sometimes, to be fair. He wonders how that works when they’re together on dates at restaurants or even just studying in Nancy’s room.

The lady working the desk at the mechanic gives them hot chocolate in little wax paper cups. Steve really likes the people in this town. Maybe this is where he should move away to. He could live on a farm or something and grow corn and let everyone think he’s at college. But then, farmers have to wake up really early and he doesn’t look good in plaid.

They get a few minutes to sip on their hot chocolate in the warmth of the office area before they’re called out to the garage. The speed at which the problem was determined gives him hope for a minute that it’ll be something small, easily fixable, but the mechanic guy puts his hands on his hips and gives them a grim look. The kind of grim look Steve’s doctor gave him after his last concussion, which is kind of funny but it’s not really the time to laugh.

“It’s your fuel injector. The thing’s faulty. It happens sometimes in this model for whatever reason, despite the price. I’m surprised you got this far on it without a problem.”

Nancy turns to look at Steve, for whatever reason, and the look on his face must confirm that this is not a good problem to have. She has her stressed out face on. Eyebrows pulled together, lips pursed, cheeks slowly starting to turn pink like she’s embarrassed that her car

would dare to have a faulty part. “Is it something we can replace?”

“Eventually, sure. But that’s a part we’d have to call in for and it’ll take a few days to get out here.”

“*God.*” Nancy presses both hands to her eyes and tilts her head back, stress radiating from her entire being.

“Okay, hey, it’s alright.” Steve interjects. “We could rent a car.”

“And leave Mr. Wheeler’s here?” Jonathan asks.

“Pick it up on the way back.” Robin suggests.

“That seems…risky.”

“What’ll happen to it? It’s just gonna be sitting here. If anything, Mr. Wheeler should totally thank us.”

“One thing.” The mechanic guy cuts in, looking almost guilty to deliver even more bad news while Nancy already looks like she’s going to clench her jaw so hard it shatters. “The closest place I know where there’s for sure a car rental place, okay, is probably gonna be Goodland. It’s about an hour and a half out if you stay on 70.”

“Okay, listen up, I got it.” Robin tugs them into a group huddle. “We leave the car here and we ride with Lloyd to Goodtown or whatever. We rent a car and get on our merry way to Utah, then bring the car back to the rental place and have Lloyd drive us back here to pick up the Dodge. It’ll totally work.”

“I doubt this random guy is going to want to drive us an hour and a half twice.” Jonathan points out. “He doesn’t even know us.”

“And I can’t afford a rental car.” Nancy adds.

“I can get it.” Steve shrugs. “My parents won’t care if it’s on my card as long as we don’t get, like, a Rolls Royce.”

“And I’ll talk to Lloyd!” Robin insists, already backing up to find him outside the garage before any more objections can be made. With the huddle broken, Nancy takes a few steps away to glare at the car and

Jonathan crosses his arms over his chest with a sigh.

“This guy is not going to drive us anywhere.” Jonathan mutters. “There’s a big difference between a five minute ride to the mechanic and a three hour roundtrip.”

“Robin’s charming, okay? She makes these weird little connections with people and they’ll do anything for her.”

And that she does. She returns only three minutes later. They collect their bags from the deceased Dodge and Robin leads them out to the truck, where Lloyd is already sitting inside with the engine idling. Apparently he agreed pretty much immediately and Robin didn’t want to ask why and give him any time to change his mind. Steve figures this might be elder abuse or something. Are they taking advantage of this guy? One second he was just having lunch at a diner and now he’s merging back onto the highway with four random teenagers in his truck.

Twenty minutes into the journey it starts to become a little bit clearer. Lloyd wants to talk. He talks about his kids first. He has two daughters and a son, all of whom have kids of their own giving him a grand total of six grandchildren. Some of them live out where you all are, Lloyd says, in Indiana. He does think the name Hawkins sounds familiar for some reason, and Steve would bet money that that reason is the evening news for two weeks straight starting on July 4th.

Robin is engrossed in this entire story, following it down every meandering little detour it takes to recount people and places they’ve all never heard of. Even Nancy starts to listen once she comes out of her panic over leaving the car, chin propped on her fist while she asks about Lloyd’s oldest daughter who does lawyer stuff. Jonathan, however, is turned to face the window and entirely silent.

Finally, Lloyd seems tired of talking about himself and turns the conversation over to them by asking what they’re traveling for. Steve wonders what he’d say if they told him the truth. *So actually, there are these things called Demogorgons…*

“We’re on a college trip.” Nancy tells him.

“Oh good, good. Let’s hear the plans, then.”

“I actually want to go to Berkeley.” Robin readily informs him. Steve is glad she has this time to talk about it, since he kinda fucked it up for her earlier. He vows to keep his mouth shut and his expression neutral this time. “But I’m still gonna tour these places because I think it’ll still be nice to see campuses and dorms and stuff.”

There’s a beat where someone else is supposed to go, so Nancy sits up straighter and says, “I’m not really settled on anywhere in particular yet. I’m looking at schools with good journalism programs.”

Lloyd makes a low whistling noise. “Real fancy. Television news or paper?”

Nancy shrugs. “I’m kind of over newspapers. I think TV news is going to make papers obsolete, anyways.”

“Well maybe I’ll see you on there one night.”

It makes Nancy beam. She’s used to old guys shooting her down, like her dad and her old bosses she had to eventually kill. Much like Cathy from the diner, Steve wishes Lloyd could stay with them the entire trip. He seems to lighten the mood for the majority of them, excluding Jonathan whose turn it is to talk, incidentally. Steve has to lightly elbow him to make this clear.

“Oh, uh, I’m gonna go to NYU. For photography.”

Lloyd nods and there’s a long silence before Steve realizes he’s being looked at expectantly in the rearview mirror. Sometimes he forgets that people look at him and see a teenager. He doesn’t feel like a teenager. He hasn’t in a long time, despite still being a year away from leaving the title behind forever. He can feel the tips of his ears getting warm like they do when he’s humiliated or wine drunk and looks at the car mat below his feet to stave off the oncoming shame that always accompanies this question.

“I’m not doing college.” He says, trying to make his voice sound light and breezy. If he turned his head to the right, he would probably see sympathy from Nancy. To the left, he doesn’t know what he’d see.

Not that Jonathan really seems in the mood to react to anything at the moment, but he may not even know that Steve isn't going to school. Most people assume he's on a gap year or whatever, just trying to find the perfect moment to leave Hawkins behind and start doing what he's supposed to do. What everyone does.

"You know, I've got a niece in Nebraska who's set up with financial aid. Helps a lot."

Now Steve thinks he might just curl up and die right here in the middle of this backseat from how utterly humiliating it is. Not humiliating that Lloyd thinks he needs financial help, but because at least that would be a reason. No one would begrudge him not going to school if it was for some noble cause like staying home and working to put food on the table for his family. That's the kind of thing that's admirable, that makes people like Jonathan so quietly impressive.

There's nothing impressive about Steve. Barely anything admirable, though Dustin must see *something* in him, somewhere. He's a rich kid who's too stupid to get into any schools, wasting his money on milkshakes and movies every day when it should be funding his career and his...future.

The future is such a foreign concept to him now. It doesn't seem real. It doesn't seem like he'll ever be a story for his parents to tell to strangers in their backseat.

"It's not that, uh," Steve's voice audibly goes hoarse in the utter silence of the car. Simon and Garfunkel could really stand to sing a little louder. "I just don't think I'm ready, I guess. To leave my hometown and stuff."

"I hear you. I left mine and came right back."

"You're from Collyer?" Robin asks. Lloyd nods.

"Went to school for business, graduated and everything, and came right back to find a job for the summer before I started somethin' full-time. Thing is, I ended up never really wanting to leave the firestation. Figured I could be a lot more useful there than trying to

sell people cars that don't even work."

Nancy laughs. It means she's feeling something other than pity for Steve. He finds Lloyd's eyes, half-lidded, in the mirror again and asks, "So you never really used your degree?"

Lloyd shrugs. "Some people do, some people don't. Would've made a lot more money if I did, but all that really ends up mattering when you're old and wrinkled like me is that you cared what you did. That you liked it and felt good doing it."

Steve thought maybe this trip would feel like a movie. When people in movies go on road trips, they have big life-changing moments while nice music plays and the view outside the car is beautiful and inspiring and almost too impressive to be real. Right now, the view is still just corn stalks. The sun is setting but not very majestically because there are dull gray clouds blocking out any chance for a nice view. The music is too quiet to hear unless Steve really strains, but he still feels like this is an important moment. A moment where he learns something.

He's never met anyone like Lloyd before, and sure that's partially his own fault for avoiding having conversations with senior citizens. But it feels good to talk to someone who's already lived through all the stressful parts of life and now can just spend his time driving around whenever the situation calls for it. It means his words are actually worthwhile and credible. When Dad tells him stuff about college and careers and what Steve'll amount to if he doesn't start seriously making changes to his life (it's nothing, for the record, absolutely nothing) it sounds so serious and irrefutable. But really, what does he fucking know? He cheats on his wife and his kid hates him.

Steve is really tired. It was hard to sleep in the motel because the heat was up a little too high and he was running through all the possible things waiting for them in Utah. His nap was interrupted earlier, too. He really wishes he could rest his head somewhere but the shoulders to either side of him don't seem like good options. He would be okay with it, but Nancy probably wouldn't and Jonathan almost certainly wouldn't.

So he leans his head back against the window and says, "Yeah, I'll

figure it out."

He doesn't sleep, but he tunes in and out of a story Lloyd has started on about...arson? He thinks it's about arson. Robin and Nancy are equally enthralled, hanging onto every word and taking turns asking questions. Though they aren't technically interacting directly with each other, Steve can't help but see this as some sort of progress. Something they have in common. A deep fascination with arson.

The hour and a half goes by quickly and Steve is only just starting to feel nauseous when they pull into the rental place, sun low in the sky behind the building. Lloyd helps them figure everything out at the desk and all Steve has to do is sign the papers, as the oldest among them, and hand over his credit card. They get hooked up with a nice Chrysler minivan that will at least eliminate the game of bag Jenga they've been playing. It smells vaguely like a funeral home on the inside. Steve spends another fifty cents on a pine scented air freshener to dangle from the rearview and then all that's left is to transfer everything over.

Saying goodbye to Lloyd is sad, despite the fact that he's coming back to get them in a week. If it were anyone else, Steve might have some shadow of doubt that the deal would be upheld, but he trusts Lloyd. He's coming back. He shakes Steve's hand, grips it really hard like he thinks Steve can handle that, and helps them load their bags.
"I'm sad." Robin declares as they watch Lloyd put his truck into reverse and start the process of backing out from the tiny space in the lot. "We should've invited him to come."

"One sec." Jonathan says suddenly, hastily, as he starts forward and does a fast walk towards Lloyd's truck before he can start towards the exit. Steve watches Jonathan motion for Lloyd to roll the window down and lean forward to say something, hand braced against the car door. Lloyd listens for a few seconds, then shrugs his shoulders and says something in response that makes Jonathan appear...confused. Lloyd keeps talking as the car starts rolling forward and Jonathan stands stiffly, hearing and watching and feeling *something*, Steve wishes he knew.

Even once the truck is out of the lot, starting down the street, and entirely out of sight past the line of gas stations and motels and fast

food restaurants, Jonathan is standing motionless and looking off in that direction.

“Should we…?” Robin makes a useless gesture and Nancy shakes her head.

“No. Give him a second.”

She’s right. It’s all Jonathan needs--a second. He swivels towards them and walks back with a neutral face, like nothing happened, at all. If they don’t ask what just occurred he probably won’t acknowledge it at all, which Steve thinks might be okay. Maybe he doesn’t really need to know. Robin must not feel the same way, because she eagerly inquires, “What was that?”

“I thought I left something in the truck.” Jonathan says simply. He opens the driver’s side door to their new car, apparently eager and willing to get comfortable in their new domain. He motions for Steve to toss the keys over and catches them easily. He seems...better? It’s the first time Steve has really seen his face since the car exploded, but he can't tell if this sudden burst of energy is actually Jonathan's mood improving or him just suddenly deciding to power through it, like he can force himself to snap out of it. Steve knows that tactic because he uses it quite often. It doesn't really work. It does, however, convince the people around him that he's fine. Unfortunately for Jonathan, Steve knows all the giveaways. The smile that's a little too forced, the hand gripping the keys too tight, and usually there's some sort of sudden diversion, although Jonathan hasn't yet--

“Let’s get Burger King.”

Author's Note:

> so like this is gonna be Long and there's a whole Plan and hopefully i can actually execute it the way i want it to!!! thank u to em @lesbianrobin for reading this and hyping it up and encouraging me to keep going ilysm. title is obv from landslide by fleetwood mac

hmu on tumblr @steveharrington :-)